

**THE
BORDER OF BLADES
AN ANGLO-INDIAN ROMANCE**

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CAPTAIN BEDFORD FORAN



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THE BORDER OF BLADES

To
MY WIFE

THE BORDER OF BLADES

AN ANGLO-INDIAN ROMANCE

BY

CAPTAIN BEDFORD FORAN

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

	PAGE
GALA DAY IN PESHAWUR	I

CHAPTER II

BENEATH THE ROSE-HEDGE	13
--------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE OF LALLAJI	26
------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV

A MESSAGE FROM MIR KHAN	39
---------------------------------	----

CHAPTER V

FOR THE NORTHERN ARMY CUP	51
-----------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI

MIR KHAN TALKS THINGS OVER	64
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VII

PAGE

MAXWELL PREPARES A SURPRISE	76
-------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VIII

MIR KHAN MAKES AN OFFER	89
---------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IX

FAREWELL TO PESHAWUR	102
------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER X

A WATCHER IN THE TOILS	115
--------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XI

MADHO RAO, MURDERER	127
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XII

ACROSS THE HILLS	140
--------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII

"THE RAJ, SAHIB!"	153
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIV

TOO LATE	165
------------------	-----

CONTENTS

vii

CHAPTER XV

	PAGE
IN THE TULWAR'S HILT	177

CHAPTER XVI

HOW THE JIRGAH ENDED	190
--------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVII

THE TROUBLE-BREEDER WINS	202
------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVIII

A TALK WITH PETROVSKI	215
---------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE TOWER	228
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XX

PETROVSKI PAYS	240
--------------------------	-----



CHAPTER I

GALA DAY IN PESHAWUR

"WHO is that good-looking man passing the grand stand with Colonel Peyton?"

Marjorie Danton nodded toward the tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in racing jacket, breeches, and solar topee, walking quickly toward the paddock.

The flat mile for the Garrison Cup had just been finished, and the figure below the headquarters-staff box had caught her eye.

There was something in the stride of the lithe, free-swinging form which spoke eloquently of the open places, of things and deeds worth while, and Marjorie Danton was still too new to the country to overlook these things.

She had arrived only a week before to join her father, the General Officer commanding the Peshawur district, and as yet knew only a few of the European residents. Her companion, Captain Sydney Ballantyre, A.D.C. to the General, laughed at the words.

"It's a new thing to meet any one who does not know old Maxwell, Miss Danton," he answered "Do you mean to say you haven't heard of the famous Maxwell?"

"Of course I have! And that is the Major

himself?" Her eyes followed the tall figure eagerly. "Mother is always talking of him."

"So are other mothers," chuckled Ballantyre. "The unmarried ladies are head-over-heels, and I shrewdly suspect most of the married ones are also."

The girl laughed lightly. She was the slim, girlish type of Englishwoman, found more often at home than abroad, with the English sun still warm in her cheeks.

Yet she was no mere slip of a girl, and beneath the eager interest with which she greeted the new and delightful world that was now her home there lay a dignity, a purpose in life, that few if any of her companions ever sensed.

She was a soldier's daughter, and to her the greatest things in the world were the real things—the things striven for and hard bought.

As Ballantyre glanced at her it occurred to him that the wavy golden hair needed only a halo to be worthy some shrining in dim places of stained glass and nuances of light, which was a very unusual thought to occur to happy-go-lucky Sydney Ballantyre.

"Tell me something about this Lothario," said Marjorie gaily, turning frankly to her companion. "Is he such a lady-killer, really? Father said he had just come back from Kabul, where he was attached to the Resident's staff."

"Oh, Lord! You're as bad as the rest of 'em!" laughed Ballantyre in mock dismay. "No, he's not, Miss Danton. He's one of those chaps who would sooner run a mile than enter a drawing-room. Every one looks upon him as a confirmed

woman-hater—and, of course, that only makes all the women like him better,” he added, with the knowing air of a boy.

“Of course”—and Marjorie smiled quietly to herself. “If I were a soldier I would want to always be in camp, always doing things, rather than to be carrying teacups and compliments to silly women.”

“No danger of Maxwell ever doing that,” chuckled the officer. “He’s a soldier, and nothing else—mighty young for a major, being only thirty, I believe. He won his brevet in the Malakand for staff services, and has been through eight campaigns. You ought to see his row of ribbons! He has the D.S.O., too; lucky dog!”

The enthusiasm of the boy was good to hear. Marjorie Danton wondered what kind of man this might be, whom the women loved in vain and the men praised so highly. For it is very easy to win the smiles of women and the shrugs of men, or the smiles of men and the shrugs of women, but it is very hard to win the smiles of both alike.

“I heard daddy saying something the other night about his being recommended for the V.C. in the Chitral,” she said. “Do you know what it was?”

“I should jolly well think I did, Miss Danton,” broke out Ballantyre eagerly. “It was just like good old Maxwell to make way for a young subaltern who had nothing but his pay and his career before him. You see, they had both brought in a wounded Sowar under a heavy fire, but it was Maxwell who covered Pomeroy’s retreat. He knew both couldn’t get the cross, so he told the General

that it meant everything to Pomeroy and that the boy ought to be recommended alone. That's the sort of thing that makes his Lancers swear that he's nothing short of a god."

Marjorie's face brightened. "What a fine man he must be!" she said quietly, and gave her attention to the crowd below as the saddling-bell for the steeplechase rang out.

It was a gay crowd, even for Peshawur. The Tenth Bengal Lancers were "at home" to garrison and civilians at the semi-annual race-meeting, and all the world and his wife had turned out to witness the sport of kings. The multicoloured parasols of the ladies blended harmoniously with uniforms and the riotous colour of natives' garments, nor were the surroundings of the scene less gorgeous.

India ends with the mountains as suddenly as she begins with the sea. Out of the far-stretching plain one draws into a narrow valley. On either side it is shepherded by blue hills, not high, but rising abruptly out of the level; over their crests, deep into the horizon, lean mounting sheets of perpetual snow, and on the tongue of the valley stands Peshawur.

There it has stood sentry ever since cities began to be, looking forward through the teeth of the hungry mountains, looking back to the gullet of the fat plains. The mountains are lean, swift, and bloody, the plains are gorged, sleek, and timid; and the peoples of mountain and plain are as their homes. Above, a curling zigzag of smoke up the hillside marks the Khyber, which has belched horde upon horde of hungry hillsmen to fatten on the corn of India.

Peshawur itself is almost as old as the hills, but, being a border town, makes no enticing show of riches. It has been sacked and sacked and sacked again by Mogul and Moslem and Rajput, and looks as if it expected sack to-morrow. It stands to-day the archetype of cities, the lowest common denominator of habitation. And but an hour's journey distant are the rocks where stranger or friend alike may be shot in the back for his rifle.

Marjorie Danton sighed with very joy of the vision, as her gaze swept from the race-course to the giant ruggedness of the hills above. The young officer's eyes followed hers, and he sat meshed in the silent grandeur of the Khyber hills.

"Isn't it magnificent?" he asked softly.

"Too lovely for words, Captain Ballantyre! I had never dreamed that mountains could look so wonderful. I have often tried to picture the Khyber, but——"

Ballantyre touched her arm. "The steeple-chase!" he reminded her, and a moment later both rose to their feet as the riders walked their horses from the paddock into the course, turned swiftly on the track, and lying low upon the sleek necks, drove them past the stands at a smart gallop.

"That's Major Maxwell riding the black, isn't it?" asked the girl, tugging at her glasses.

"Yes. He has a pretty sure thing in this race. He's the best man over the sticks in India, and his mare, Judith, is a witch when it comes to hurdling. Hello, here's Manners!"

Bobby Manners, a gay young subaltern in the

Irish Fusiliers, ran up the steps of the General's box, an open betting-book in hand. He was a fresh-faced boy who affected a gold-rimmed monocle, but throughout the garrison he was known for a gay young blade, ready to bet at a moment's notice on anything under the sun, give or take. Rather unfortunately for himself, he had not an enemy in the world.

"How do, Miss Danton!" He gave a broad grin of welcome, removing his sun helmet. "What's the betting on old Maxwell for this race, Syd? Hope you have something on him, Miss Danton."

"Taking odds or laying them?" inquired Ballantyre slyly.

"Either one, old man!" Manners answered brightly, after hurriedly consulting his book. "I can afford to be generous, as I stand now."

"Right! I'll take three to one, Bobby."

"Whoa, laddie! Come off your lofty perch! I'll lay you two to one, you thief! Honestly, that's the best I can do, and it's stretching a point at that."

"Very well," laughed Ballantyre, amused at the other's serious manner. "Make it ten to five in sovereigns, Bobby."

"Good! Thanks; I'll jot it down." Manners scribbled the bet, raised his helmet to Marjorie, and leaped down the steps three at a time to find other betting-men.

Marjorie laughed musically. "He's a nice boy, Captain Ballantyre!"

"One of the best, barring his weakness for betting," and the other echoed her laugh. He

was very fond of the young Irish officer, and the two were inseparable companions when duty permitted.

Maxwell was the last to gallop past the grand stand, for the black mare was behaving badly and he had difficulty in getting her under control. As he passed the paddocks, in the tail of the others, he was met with a volley of cheers. Both mare and rider were the popular choice in this event.

The cheers grew into a wild roar as he passed the enclosure set aside for the native soldiers, who had turned out in force. The Indian loves sports—even better than the Caucasian; and, above all, he loves a polo-match or a race-meet.

But Maxwell looked neither to right nor left as the Lancers set up a storm of cheers. The mare had steadied down now, and half-way down the "straight" he pulled her up to a walk, ready for the start.

The first attempt at a "go" failed, but the second was a perfect start. As the riders rose in a bunch over the first hurdle, a breathless silence crept over the crowd.

Jump after jump was taken without mishap, Maxwell driving his mount steadily among the first six, hugging the rail as closely as he dared, until the horses began to string out a bit. As they flashed past the stands for the first round of the course, Marjorie Danton voiced her excitement.

"Hurrah for the black! Do you think Major Maxwell will win?"

"Barring accidents, he and Judith together are certain of first place," replied Ballantyre, his glasses fixed eagerly on the string of horses.

Still the same six were in the van. They rose at the jumps almost in perfect unison, and so far not a man had come down. Around the far end of the course they galloped, with the "straight" and the last four jumps ahead of them, then the race for the post.

At the bend one of the six leaders dropped behind. The first jump in the straight was safely negotiated, but as the five rose at the second jump there came a sudden yell of dismay from a thousand throats. One of the horses had stumbled, fallen, and brought two others down in a wild heap. All were quickly up, however, and once more racing on; but now Maxwell and another were in front, side by side.

The two rose and landed together at the next jump, whips out and plying vigorously. Only the last jump remained before the final gallop, and as the two rose in air a cheer swelled up—that changed on the instant into a groan and a scream.

For, even as the two horses landed, one was seen to stumble, swerve, and crash into the other. The other riders were too close behind to stop, and rose at the jump only to hurtle down in a confused mass of struggling men and kicking horses.

After that first wild scream an instant of silence fell, to be broken by the shriek of a woman in the crowd. Marjorie Danton gazed, pale-faced but silent, while Ballantyre swore under his breath. Men were running out on the track to help the riders, and the horses were pulled up. Hastily excusing himself, Ballantyre leaped down the steps of the box and ran swiftly up the track, joining a pair of regimental surgeons.

Marjorie saw four of the horses get on their feet, but one lay still, with never a struggle. Suddenly she lowered her glasses and cased them, sinking back into her seat. The horse on the ground was the black mare, and Maxwell was being helped across the track to the paddock.

A few moments later Ballantyre rejoined her, and she rose with anxious face.

"It was dreadful!" and there was horror in her voice. "Was any one badly hurt?"

"No, Miss Danton," answered the officer gravely. "Maxwell got a bad shaking-up. That other fool's horse swerved into him as they landed, and the others couldn't stop. Judith's leg has been broken. That will cut Maxwell up badly, for he loved the mare like a human being. He was not injured, however."

"I'm glad of that!" exclaimed the girl, in relief. "What awfully hard luck, just as he was winning the race—and what a pity about that splendid mare!"

At this moment the General himself arrived, and hastened to reassure them.

"Don't worry, my dear. It's really nothing serious. Maxwell will be all right in a few moments. Ballantyre and I will take you to get some tea."

He took her arm in his and led the way from the box, all three walking toward the Lancers' mess marquee, where tea was being served. As they sipped their tea Marjorie caught a glimpse of Maxwell entering the tent, surrounded by his brother officers. He was looking somewhat pale, but replied to the anxious questions showered upon

him by a smile and a wave of the hand. General Danton touched Ballantyre's arm.

"Tell Maxwell that I'd like to see him, there's a good fellow."

The aide-de-camp hastened to obey, and a moment later returned with the Major at his side. The latter raised his terai helmet and stood at attention.

"You wanted me, sir?" he inquired, in a deep, self-contained voice.

"I wanted to make sure you are not badly hurt," smiled the General.

"Oh, it's nothing serious, sir," Maxwell laughed lightly, shrugging his shoulders and tightening his lips immediately after. "A bit shaken, that's all."

"You're lucky, then." The General rose to his feet. "Let me introduce Major Maxwell, Tenth Bengal Lancers, my dear. My daughter, Maxwell."

Maxwell took Marjorie's slender hand in his brown, lean one and smiled.

"I've been hearing a lot about you lately, Miss Danton!"

"I trust you heard nothing but kind things, then," and she darted a smile of mischief into his frank, lightly lined face. "I've been hearing all sorts of tales out of school about you, too!"

Maxwell smiled, but his eyes narrowed a trifle. "They're always rotting me behind my back, Miss Danton. You must not believe all you hear in India, for this climate warps people's imaginations tremendously."

"I don't think the tales I've been hearing are

warped," laughed the girl, with a trace of conviction in her voice. "Father has been holding you up as a model officer to all subalterns who have dined with us since I arrived in Peshawur."

"General Danton does me too much honour." Maxwell bowed gravely, reddening under his tan, but the words carried their literal meaning to his hearers. Ballantyre smiled as he watched, for Marjorie's direct attack had plainly disconcerted the other.

"Will you take me out to see the horses?" she asked brightly.

Maxwell was not minded to spend any great length of time in the company of a girl fresh from home, and to retail the same old yarns of the country that had done service for these many years, but there was no hint of this in his smiling response, and the two moved off together.

Those who saw Maxwell walking about the paddock with Marjorie Danton blinked in wonder at the phenomenon. For the first time in history Maxwell was seen in conversation with a lady—deeply interested conversation, that is.

To his surprise he found that this girl did not ask the usual questions at all, but chattered gaily, until he felt himself drawn into the mood, enjoying the quick flashes of wit she flung at him, and responding in turn.

"What odds?" queried Bobby Manners softly, stealing up behind Ballantyre with a cautious glance at the General. "Old woman-hater falls a victim at last! Odds?" His pencil hovered over his ever-ready book.

"I don't take money from babes and sucklings,"

rejoined the other with mock dignity. "However, I'll wager a four-to-one shot—no, I'll let you have fives. Is it a go?"

"Right-o! Fifty to ten in sovs., old chap."

Manners grinned happily, jotted down the bet, adjusted his monocle, and departed in search of another victim.

Maxwell paid no attention to the looks which he felt rather than observed. For almost the first time in years he was taking real pleasure in a woman's society. The whole-souled, genuine interest of Marjorie Danton was a new thing to him, and seeing that she knew few of those about them, he kept up a running commentary of anecdotes about the people they encountered. Yet they were wholesome anecdotes, untinged with the prevalent colour of Indian gossip.

As the girl noticed the firm, tanned face, the little wrinkles that crept about his eyes, telling of far distances, the slight touch of grey at his temples, she knew that this was a man above the common run of men. When he had put her into the General's carriage and she drove off at her father's side, she was unusually silent.

"I think," she said to herself that night, "that Major Maxwell is a man who is not content with the smaller things of life."

And Maxwell, alone in his quarters, was saying exactly the same thing to himself about Marjorie Danton.

CHAPTER II

BENEATH THE ROSE-HEDGE

BETWEEN the city gates and the cantonments, two miles out, the dust-yellow road leads past the race-course and polo-grounds. Along the Mall the yellow grass, the palms, the crimson-purple bells, the trees knobby with new buds, the hedges beginning to redden and cream into a wealth of roses, and the soft breathing of violets—where is a city to equal Peshawur the divine in its glory of gardens?

Major Raymond Maxwell rode at an easy canter over the dust-grey plain toward the Peshawur Club, whistling contentedly to himself. The native soldiers tramping into the city saluted him affectionately, and he returned the salutes with punctilious exactness.

To them he was more than a mere man bearing the King's commission, for Ghurka, Sikh, and Pathan alike had talked with him in their own tongues, and it was whispered that between campaigns he had borne strange names that were not his own; but of this none knew the truth save Maxwell and Certain Ones at Simla.

He was a soldierly figure as he rode through the magnificence of the rose-gardens, swaying to the movements of his Arab stallion. Before him

the rays of the westering sun lighted the superb pass.

He noted, as he had noted a hundred times before, how deceptive it looked. Beneath the ridges one expects the pass ; but on riding through, the plains are still there. That gap beyond must be the mouth, of course ; but before one knows it the jaws of brown rock have clamped down on either side, a round hill of brown rock blocks the way, a turn in the road and a ridge of brown rock encloses you behind.

Above the walls, beyond the hill, behind the ridge, other walls and hills and ridges spring up with every turn, each more sheer and mazy than the first. Frowning overhead, slipping away underfoot, shutting the whole world into two cliffs and an abyss, the Khyber is a mere riotous perplexity of mountains. And seeing all this, Maxwell sighed, glorying in the rough beauty before him.

" Alms, heaven-born ! Alms, in the name of the compassionate ! "

The Arab shied suddenly. Maxwell looked down at a ragged, hideous figure that scarred the beauty of the rose-hedge behind it. He reined up suddenly.

" The compassionate has many names, dog ! " he answered in Urdu. " Thy creed ? "

Scarce human in his mask of dirt and disease, the beggar grinned loathsomely.

" In the name of the watchers of the hills, heaven-born, give alms ! "

Maxwell started, then nodded quietly, his eyes sweeping the road. It was empty, save for a scarlet-whiskered Afghan, plodding along five

hundred yards away. The houses around were closed, for the most part, at this hour ; behind the rose-hedge stretched a quiet little English garden.

"The alms are ready," snapped Maxwell curtly, a gleam in his grey eyes. "Thy word, and quickly."

"Two weeks ago, heaven-born, I was in the Tulwar's Hilt." The creature spoke swiftly and low, while Maxwell fumbled at the breast of his tunic. "Mir Khan I saw ; he will be here presently to see the political agent. Also, protector of the poor, I saw the breeder of trouble ; *ai*, him I saw and fled in haste, lest he know me and flay me there on the rocks ! "

As he listened, Maxwell's eyes narrowed in surprise, and his firm lips tightened in repression. Before he spoke he flung a packet into the dust and wheeled the Arab.

"Simla. And hasten ! "

The beggar bawled profuse thanks after him, but Maxwell rode on to the club in frowning thought. At his shout the sais ran out and took the stallion in charge, and for the time Maxwell flung off his anxious mood.

The sound of clinking ice and hearty laughter greeted him. Seated about the wicker tables on the veranda under the swaying punkas were a dozen or more officers of the garrison, who made room for him with a cordiality that left no doubt of his welcome.

"What's your shout, sir?" asked Bobby Manners, with a trifle of deference, as he sank into one of the Bombay easy-chairs. "Khitmatgar, take the Major sahib's order."

"*Burra* whisky, *chota* soda, *lao!*" Maxwell nodded to the butler and leaned back with a lazy sigh of content, for his muscles still ached after his heavy spill two days previously. "Well, what's the latest news?" he inquired genially. "I've been poring over maps all afternoon."

"Same old story," returned Daniels, a staff captain. "Sergeant and four native sowars to-day, up in the pass. A friendly Afridi brought in the news, and the General's fearfully worked up over it."

"The devil!" ejaculated Maxwell, sitting up in surprise. "Scuppered them all?"

"With one volley," nodded Daniels, the others watching Maxwell gravely. "Twenty or thirty hillsmen, I suppose. Mir Khan, of course."

"About time the blood-thirsty heathen was taught a lesson," snapped Manners viciously. "I suppose he'll be swaggering around as usual and disclaiming all knowledge of it."

"Of course," returned Maxwell, staring down at his glass. "Too bad—he's a fine fellow, in his way. But he's not the one to be feared."

"What's that you're discussing," broke in a new arrival, a young civilian whose manners needed sandpaper—"the latest stir? Think the General will do something?"

"Shut up, Archibald!" commanded grey-haired Colonel Peyton of the Ghurkās. "Go on, Maxwell."

"I was about to say that we needn't fear Mir Khan if he were left to himself. There is only one man behind this business. The trouble-breeder is on the job."

A little silence fell on the group, as if a shadow had suddenly covered them. For an instant no one spoke, but eyes sought eyes, and Peyton frowned. Then Archibald's rather inane laugh broke the spell.

"The trouble-breeder ! That's a new one, isn't it? Sounds like Manners here. By the way, Major, I was in at the Cowper bungalow a few moments ago—saw your run-in with the beggar by the hedge. What did you give the chap? Looked like papers to me."

Archibald's voice had rung out loudly, but it faltered away suddenly as a dead hush fell over the groups on the veranda. The cub looked about uneasily, and found all eyes centred on Maxwell, whose bronzed cheeks had lightened at the words. Without answering at once, Maxwell raised his glass with steady hand and drank. Then he turned and bored into Archibald with eyes of cold flame.

"You are mistaken, sir," he said slowly and quietly. "The man asked me for alms and I gave him alms. Who the deuce sent you to Peshawur, Archibald? "

The civilian flushed, and stammered out something that was lost in a hasty rush of conversation from the rest. But the older men sat silent and thoughtful, cursing his interference.

Only the pick of the Indian army was kept at this back door of India, facing the bear whose claws were gripped on the frontier hills beyond ; it was said that the Peshawur troops could take the field, fully equipped for a month's campaign, at a day's notice. Those who gave their lives to

the border of blades had small patience with the Archibalds.

"Well, here's a toast to a quick campaign," announced Colonel Peyton. "Never saw a man so angry as the General is to-night. He swears that if Simla won't let him take a swipe at Mir Khan he'll resign in disgust. This makes the fifth outrage within a month, and Mir Khan's tribesmen are responsible."

"By Jove!" cried Bobby Manners. "Hope we have a hill trip!"

Maxwell grunted suddenly. "You fellows never saw the Tulwar's Hilt, did you? Few of us ever have, I imagine. A bare bridge of flat rock that rises above the hills, with two flanking ridges on the lower end that gave it the name. Town and fortalice at the upper end, no end of Russian guns and Afghan jezails to sweep the approach—that's what we'd find after we got through the hills, if we ever got through."

No one asked how Maxwell knew so much about the place. The name of the Tulwar's Hilt was a famous one, but more of a legend than actual fact. Mir Khan's nominal place of residence was within twenty miles of Peshawur, and the hill ruler himself was a well-known figure in the city.

"Yes, I've heard it was a tough thing," and Colonel Peyton signed the chit and fell silent. From the distant lines the bugles of the garrison sounded the "Retreat," the sound drifting softly and clearly to the officers at the tables. Then the drums and fifes of the Irish Fusiliers took up the stirring music, and as he listened Maxwell forgot the air of constraint that hovered over the group. As the music died away Peyton rose.

"I'm dining at the General's," he announced. "I believe you are, too, Maxwell?"

"Yes, sir." Maxwell rose and sauntered away with the other. A moment later they were in the saddle and cantering toward the lines.

"I understand from Ballantyre that the dinner is in honour of the General's daughter," said the Colonel. "By the way, Maxwell, that cub Archibald must be silenced. It was confoundedly awkward! Understand me," he added hurriedly, as Maxwell was about to speak, "I am asking no questions, Raymond. It merely happened that before you arrived we had been discussing something important. General Danton told me an hour ago that the Afridi who brought in news of the killing of the five men also stated that the hillmen had accurate information of the garrison and everything it did."

Maxwell felt the red flame into his face, and drew rein until his Arab plunged.

"Look here, Peyton, that's a beastly——"

"Nonsense!" laughed Colonel Peyton, reaching out a hand to Maxwell's. "Don't be an ass, old chap! Look here, was that straight about the trouble-breeder? If he's at work in this quarter, things are bound to be lively."

"He's at the Tulwar's Hilt now," replied Maxwell quietly, ashamed of the thought that had swept over him. Of course these men about him, who had known him for years, who had fought and starved and bled with him, whose lives were devoted with his to the frontier, would never dream of connecting him with rank treachery.

Peyton whistled. "That's news for the

General! Well, let's be moving. Confounded nuisance, this dinner."

"I suppose there'll be the usual bunch of women there," laughed Maxwell. "Colonels' wives, majors' wives, and the wives that hope to be. Every mail brings out a fresh lot of them from home."

He flicked a fly from the Arab's mane as Peyton grunted. The Colonel was of his own mind as regarded women, and was wont to declare openly that they were a nuisance on the frontier, and should be herded at Simla and the down-country stations. He was a fighter, pure and simple, who had not been home for twenty years, and hoped to die in harness.

"They'll get you yet, my boy. Raymond Maxwell, D.S.O., hero of the Tenth, with a comfortable income of his own, is too good a catch to be passed up without a struggle by some determined mem-sahib. Mark my words, you'll fall a victim yet."

"I'll be hanged if I do," grunted Maxwell, albeit a trifle uneasily. "I wish you chaps wouldn't harp on the subject so much. Well, I turn off here. See you at the General's."

He cantered off to his bungalow near the Lancers' mess, which he shared with another major of the regiment. As he struggled into his mess uniform, however, Peyton's words recurred to his mind, and a feeling of disgust swept over him. Confound the fellows!

"I suppose they put Marjorie Danton in the same class with the rest," he murmured. "No designing mem-sahib about her; that girl has

a mind of her own, and one worth cultivating, too, by Jove ! ”

As he dismounted before the bungalow of the Dantons half an hour later, he stood for a moment looking out toward the great hills in the north, dimly lighted by the rising moon.

Somewhere in that maze of giants, somewhere amid the barbaric ferocity of the sons of the hills, the trouble-breeder was at work that night—a man whom Raymond Maxwell acknowledged to be dangerous, the man from whom the squalid beggar had fled as from a pestilence, the man for whose life a Certain Person at Simla had very privately offered ten lacs of rupees—and in vain.

Men might risk their lives and work devotedly for Simla, but there were ways of dying among the Afridis which were not to be faced for any gold. At least, so said the watchers of the hills.

“ We’ll meet, Serge Petrovski,” muttered Maxwell grimly. “ We have met once before, but between us there shall be no third meeting. And the day comes ! ”

His face was still grim and sombre as the butler took his cavalry cloak and ushered him into the drawing-room, mess uniform and medals glittering in the lamplight.

He made his way toward the General and Mrs. Danton and paid his respects, then turned to Marjorie, who was chatting with Ballantyre and Bobby Manners. Mrs. Danton, however, was ahead of him.

“ Marjorie, I want Major Maxwell to take you in to dinner. Your father tells me you made each other’s acquaintance at the races the other day.”

Maxwell took the girl's hand, nodding to the others.

"Do you think you can stand the ordeal?" she asked him whimsically.

"It will be a very great pleasure, I assure you," he smiled, thrilled by the vitality of the girl as he met her level gaze.

Mrs. Danton smiled up at her escort, nodding toward Maxwell and her daughter as they moved to the dining-room.

"What a splendid couple they make, Colonel Hanlon!"

"Faith, yes!" beamed the fusilier, then chuckled. "You're the same old matchmaker I used to know at Poona! I've always suspected you of being responsible for Mrs. Hanlon's capture of me. Am I right?"

"Oh, I gave my little help!" she returned lightly, and they laughed together.

The dinner was like a dream to Maxwell. This quiet, serious girl had a way of drawing him out of his shell, of disregarding his shyness, of catching at a parable and striking to the thought beneath that was new to him, and as delightful as it was new. He had a way, gained from the loneliness of the hills, of saying many things indirectly, and this was understood of few women.

"My mother tells me that you sing delightfully," the girl said frankly, just before the ladies rose. "There is a song I am very anxious to hear sung—it's that Persian thing the old silver-smith sings down by the gate. I can play the air on the piano, if you will be good enough to sing it. Please do!"

"Very well," laughed he. "But I don't know much Persian, Miss Danton. However, I'll sing a translation that was made for me. I know the thing well. I believe it's one of Hafiz's songs. By the way, I'd like to take you through the bazaars some day, if you haven't gone. It's very interesting."

The men did not remain long over their cigarettes, and when they had rejoined the ladies Maxwell was at once brought into requisition. He had a fine tenor, and was never niggardly in responding to demands upon it, although he had few love-songs in his repertoire.

Consequently, more than one chuckle went up when he announced the "Song of Hafiz," but all conversation ceased as Marjorie struck into a minor melody strangely like that sung by the old Persian silversmith at the gate below the bazaar. Every one had heard it, day after day, and greeted it with a ripple of recognition as Maxwell began to sing.

A breeze crept up from the waves and caressed the tree,
Breathing each leaf astir in the sun's pale gleam ;
And so in my love would I waft a caress to thee
That might fall to thy lips and melt, on the wings of a
dream !

A flame stole out of the west, as the dark sun waned,
To touch, ere it died, the locks of the evening star ;
And so in my song would I reach to the unattained—
Touching thy spirit but lightly and once, from afar !

The room burst into wild applause as he finished, Manners and Ballantyre leading with grins that intimated to Maxwell not a little chaffing in

the near future. They were compelled to repeat the song, and after one or two others had performed the guests began to break up into couples and groups.

"That song was splendid, Major Maxwell!" cried the girl. "Would you mind taking me out into the garden for a breath of air? It's horribly close in here."

He assented with relief, and they passed out through the French windows to the veranda. As by mutual consent they paused on the steps to gaze out to the moonlit hills in the north, the garden black in shadow to their left.

"One never grows tired of these mountains," she said softly.

"Some do, Miss Danton," Maxwell returned slowly. "The eagle hovers over them and rejoices in the snowy summits and the desolation of the wild places; but the sparrow wanders up from the plains and the heart of him is frightened, so that he curses the bare maze of brown hills, and returns as quickly as he can."

"But that is not the fault of the mountains!" she cried quickly. "Such things are too vast and grand for little people whose souls are like the souls of sparrows. Just look at those green-white peaks in the moonlight!"

"Ah!" he smiled, turning to her, "it is a pleasure to talk to oneself and find that some one else is at hand who can compre—— Ah!"

"What is it?" she exclaimed, as a quick, soft "thud" against the wooden post at his side interrupted him. His hand went up and he turned her toward the windows.

"Nothing—I struck my elbow against the rail. But I hear your mother asking for you, so perhaps we had better return."

Rather perplexed at his abrupt change, she obeyed. A moment later Maxwell beckoned the General from the crowd and drew him into a corner.

"The trouble-breeder does not like me, General," he said quietly. "You had better ring up the stables and scatter a dozen grooms through the gardens. This went between my arm and my side just now, and thudded into the veranda post," and he held out a broad-bladed kukri knife of the type carried by the hillsmen.

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE OF LALLAJI

THE burly Afghan horse-dealer pawed his crimson-dyed whiskers and inspected the hillman who had just entered the tiny booth. The latter, white-turbaned, clad in dirty pantaloons and qamis, drew one of a pair of ornately adorned pistols from his sash.

"*Aleiké-salaam, barader,*" said the white-bearded Persian courteously, looking up for an instant from his tiny forge, into which he was carefully measuring charcoal.

"Greeting, brother," returned the new-comer. Persian and Afghan grinned at his accent, and thereafter all spoke in Pushtu, the dialect of the hills. "See, one of the silver mountings has broken loose."

The old silversmith nodded, the thousand fine wrinkles and seams in his face standing out in the reflected glow as he gave life to the spark within the charcoal and took up his hammer.

"God counselleth patience, brother. Dost Ali must have his bridle ere his Arab can be sold to the officer of the British raj. Art new-come from the hills? How goes the gossip?"

The stalwart tribesman settled down on his heels beside the Afghan as old Jani fell to his task,

striking lightly and evenly, one ear attuned to the silver and the other to his customers, for of all in the bazaar old Jani was ever keenest after news.

"The eagle still screams above the mountains and snow still runs into the valleys," answered the dust-stained hillman dryly. His eyes rested lightly on the Afghan, who had relapsed into grave staring at the glow of the tiny furnace on the floor. "There is but one God."

"And Mohammed is His prophet," echoed the others mechanically, although Jani, being a Shiah, followed it with a sarcastic grunt. Dost Ali cleared his throat heavily.

"I have been to Simla with my mares." He spoke thickly and slowly, his cruel eyes glittering in the dimness. "There I heard it said that there be many gods who be watchers of the hills, but that the gods of the valleys be dead. Is this thing so, Afridi?"

The lean hillman was about to reply when Jani brought down his hammer smartly and laid the finished bit aside to cool, with a jangle of silver ornaments. At the same moment a form appeared in the doorway.

"Is the silversmith able to mend a poor bracelet in haste?"

Jani straightened up so that the light of his forge fell on the doorway. There stood an Afghan whose week-old beard could not hide a jaw of steel, and whose squalor and filth contrasted oddly with the high brow and aquiline nose. The man was slender, but was plainly a thing of corded muscle and sinew.

"God counselleth patience, brother," answered

the old silversmith again. "Our brother of the hills hath a pistol to mend first. If there be haste, one may hear other hammers clattering in the bazaars."

The Afghan paid no attention to the hint, but bowed and entered. Across the face of the Afridi passed a slight frown as he held out his pistol to Jani. The horse-dealer rose and drew forth a coin as he took his bridle. Then, although the talk had not been of horses, the hillman turned to him.

"I will come to see that horse in the light of day, brother. Where is thy khan?"

"I will wait for thee at the khan of Lal Mohammed," replied the dealer, and passed out into the night.

"What is the gossip, brother?" inquired old Jani of the new-comer. "I have not seen thy face before."

"Nay; this is my first visit to the city of roses. My name is Amir Jung, but even in Kabul have we heard of Jani the silversmith."

His eyes fell for a moment upon the Afridi, then swept over the silverwork hung about the tiny shop as Jani's hammer rose and fell; but this time there was no pause in the clattering, and the old smith seemed in haste, acknowledging the compliment with a nod.

"I know little gossip," went on Amir Jung easily, "save that men talk of tulwars and kukris in the hills."

"When did they talk of aught else?" grunted the Afridi, settling farther back into the shadow. "Yet there be chieftains who talk not, but grip the tulwar's hilt and strike!"

"Are you of the men of Mir Khan?" inquired Amir Jung very quietly, and his voice held the echo and ring of steel.

Once more old Jani interrupted the Afridi as he was about to speak. Holding out the mended pistol, the old smith flashed a single swift glance towards the hillman.

"Thy weapon is done, Afridi. Thy bracelet, Amir Jung?"

He leaned over his forge and once more measured out charcoal with great care, as the Afridi examined the pistol critically and stuck it in his belt. Paying no further heed to Amir Jung, the hillman drew out a coin and turned to the door.

"*Chab bekhair, barader*," said the white-bearded smith, and the Afridi echoed the Persian words as he passed out with a swagger. But the swagger vanished when he stood in the moonlight and cast an anxious glance around. A moment later he moved swiftly toward a little group of Ghurka soldiers clustered about a shop farther up the street. He stood behind them in silence for a moment, then touched the nearest on the arm.

"Madho Rao, step aside, for I would speak with thee."

The little Ghurka swung about, surprised. Then his flat face clouded, and he spat out an oath in Urdu.

"Away, dog of an Afridi! What have I to do with thee?"

"Fool!" hissed the other, and moved back where the light could strike his face.

"Pardon, pardon, protector!" exclaimed

Madho Rao below his breath, following in haste. "Nay, how was I to know it was thou, Maxwell sahib?"

Maxwell merely smiled.

"Listen, Madho Rao. In the shop of Jani the Persian, beside the gate, there is an Afghan with a stubble of beard, who talks of Mir Khan. I know him not, but I would know where he lodges and what he does. I am in haste to keep an appointment, and must entrust this matter to you. Be careful that he does not see you following him, for he has an automatic concealed in his belt. Now make haste. I will be at my bungalow at midnight."

The Ghurka started to salute, checked himself, and turned on his heel. Satisfied that his work would be well done, Maxwell began to thread his way swiftly through the crowds of hillmen and plainmen—Persian, Sikh, and Afghan.

Native Peshawur is like no other town in India. There is nothing Indian in its aspect—nothing Afghan, nor Persian, nor Tartar; it is merely Eastern. The houses are mere places of shelter—naked mud on naked wooden frames, cramped, compact, flat-roofed, split by narrow and winding alleys—a frightened herd of buildings huddling shoulder to shoulder beneath the old palace on one side and the fort on the other.

Few men in India knew and understood this town better than Maxwell. Since he was eighteen the frontier had been his home, his family, his country. With a rare gift of tongues, a rare comprehension of the native character, he moved about the hidden places of the frontier, from the

far-famed but well-concealed Tulwar's Hilt to the horse-fairs of Sibi. {

Many had been his escapes, many his risks, few his failures ; and for all there could be no reward other than the thanks of a Certain Person at Simla or Calcutta, and the knowledge that the British Raj was giving no inch to the growls of the Bear whose claws were gripped in the mountains.

"I wonder who that chap was?" mused Maxwell, passing swiftly and surely from dark street to dark street. "Jani knew, and wanted to get me away. If there had been a bit more light I could have seen his face better. So Dost Ali was the messenger, eh?"

He chuckled quietly to himself. The watchers of the hills took many things on trust and only Simla knew them all by name. Maxwell's work was known to few at Peshawur, and those were natives—men like Madho Rao—for only natives can keep silent.

His absences were arranged from Simla, and the General had often chaffed him about his long "hunts," from which he brought back no game.

Disguises he seldom used. He was the overseer, the arranger ; dark wash and costume will disguise any European beyond recognition of his brother, and more than once Maxwell had brushed against officers of his regiment and been cursed for an insolent Afridi. His strength lay in his resource and his knowledge no less than in his personality.

He glanced up at the old palace as he neared the European quarter with a sigh of satisfaction.

There was a ball on, and he was glad to be working instead of "frittering his time away" with the ladies.

Then he paused beneath a dark house, from which scuttled away a sleek babu, face muffled up, that faced the road. It was the house of Lallaji the Beautiful, who was famous from Kandahar to the plains country—or, rather, infamous, in European eyes. In the eyes of Maxwell, Lallaji was merely very useful.

He touched the lattice, and a few square inches of the door slid away.

"It is Iman Khan, the Afridi," he murmured. The door swung back and he stepped into a hallway dimly lit with a hanging lamp, from which opened the plain doors. Following the man who admitted him, he passed straight through to the end. The door opened—and he was in the home of the Beautiful.

Hill chiefs and rajas had contributed to its magnificence, fools from Kabul and fools from England, but none had entered it with the clean heart and seen it with the clean eyes of Raymond Maxwell, who had seen it often enough. He passed through empty rooms, whose doors, studded with silver and ivory, led to other rooms, whence came the tinkle of music and the sound of voices.

On every hand were soft hangings of Kashmir and Senna, carven lattice-work of marble and gilded wood, low-hanging censor-lamps of silver that burned sweet perfume to befog the senses and dim the intellect.

Inlay and stained glass, silks of the south and rugs of Samarcand, silver charpoys and Kitani

vases, filled the room into which he was ushered at length. And seated among soft cushions, painted and powdered and bejewelled from hand to foot, was the most powerful woman of the northland—Lallaji the Beautiful, fat and unwholesome and cunning of face.

Maxwell greeted her with grave courtesy, and, without a word, sat down opposite her and accepted the tea an attendant handed him. Then Lallaji motioned, and they were alone.

"I met the messenger," said Maxwell abruptly, "but he was prevented from talking with me. To-morrow I will obtain the writing and will send it to you to be borne on. What news of Mir Khan?"

"Little, heavenborn," answered Lallaji in a deep, soft voice, refilling her teacup from the samovar at her side. "He is to be here soon about the murders—and other things. Two days ago Firozu-din was caught by certain of his men. Nothing was found against him except that he was following an unknown trail through the hills toward the Tulwar's Hilt. He was crucified."

Maxwell nodded, suddenly pale even beneath his tan and dark wash. She continued calmly—

"A cloud has clamped down upon the mountains, protector, and all things are shrouded in mist. The knife which was thrown at thee the other night came from the Breeder of Trouble, who has offered five lacs of rupees for thy death."

"Not enough," smiled Maxwell grimly. "It were better to earn ten by *his* death. Any rumour in the hills that an expedition may go forth?"

"It is laughed at, protector. The Afridis say that the Tulwar's Hilt is beyond the Raj's reach. Fools! Little they imagine that we know the path—thou and I!"

Maxwell smiled and drew a little book from his breast. For an hour they talked, while he made notes here and there, jotted down names, or copied scraps into a second little book which Lallaji produced. Suddenly a bell tinkled, and she touched a small gong at her side. An attendant entered, handed her a paper, and silently vanished. Lallaji read the brush-written script, then looked up with inscrutable face.

"Protector, half an hour ago Jani the silver-smith was found murdered in his shop."

"What!" Maxwell leaped to his feet, surprised out of himself and shocked for once. "Jani! Are you sure?"

"Read, protector."

He ran his eyes over the paper and collected himself with an effort. Jani, the kindly old smith, dead!

"God!" he cried softly, then returned to Urdu quickly. "Lallaji, this is bad for all of us. Jani was our tower of defence here—next to you. I left him with an Afghan from Kabul—Amir Jung. I did not see the man clearly, but he was slender and had a week's beard. Have you heard of such an one?"

"No, lord," returned the woman. "But I can send forth my men to search for him."

"Do so," and Maxwell rose with troubled eyes. "Jani has paid the price, but his memory will live long— Ah!" He broke off suddenly.

"Listen—Jani knew who Amir Jung was. He *knew*! That is why he has died, Lallaji! By Allah! the man was a spy, after all!"

"So it would seem," murmured Lallaji ironically. "So Jani knew? Then none else in Peshawur knows, protector, else Jani had not been slain. Mir Khan has gathered many desperate men in the Tulwar's Hilt, sahib. It could not have been the Breeder of Trouble himself?"

Maxwell stood perplexed. "I do not know, Lallaji. As I say, I could not see his face clearly. But whoever he was he shall pay dearly for this night's work, and his master, Mir Khan, even more so."

"He will come to visit me, protector," said Lallaji quietly. "A drop of poison——"

"No!" cried Maxwell hastily. "When he is punished it must be done in such a manner that the hill country will fear the raj for ever after. The Tulwar's Hilt must be wiped out—stamped flat, destroyed utterly! That will be Mir Khan's punishment, for he is a man among men, Lallaji, and his heart will be broken."

Glancing at his watch, Maxwell saw that it was nearly midnight, and he must hasten to reach the cantonments and meet Madho Rao. Anxious and perturbed as he was by the terrible news that had reached him, he forgot his usual precautions, and strode hastily from the room.

Blinded by the sudden transition from the blazing lights to the outer darkness, he turned and stood a moment in the doorway, his figure silhouetted against the light of the hall lamp, as he whispered a forgotten message to the attendant.

When he turned to the street he found a small crowd gathered outside.

A carriage from the palace, it seemed, had broken a wheel not two yards from the door of the Beautiful, and there was a shimmer of uniforms in the moonlight. Even as the door slammed behind him, Maxwell cannoned into a group of passers-by and was brought up short by a hand that gripped his shoulder.

"What the devil!" exclaimed an irritated voice that struck cold fear through him. "Here, Manners, give this fellow a stroke of the whip!"

"No—it was not his fault, father!" broke in another voice. To his horror, Maxwell found himself the centre of a group of officers. The broken carriage was General Danton's, and the General himself was gripping his shoulder, while Marjorie was shrinking away from the dark figure in alarm, even as she pleaded for him.

"Hold up—I'll have a ticka-gharry in a minute!" cried Ballantyre. But Maxwell, looking up, found the General staring at him in wild amazement.

"My God!" cried the old soldier, in a strangled voice. The horror of the thing gripped Maxwell's throat and he could not speak, but as he glanced at Marjorie he saw that she had not yet recognized him.

"My God—you!" repeated the General. "In this costume—coming from that house!"

A word from him and he would be lost, Maxwell knew full well. A surprised cry had gone up from the others, who were crowding around, but Marjorie was still staring at him in perplexity.

"Here, trot along, you!" commanded Manners behind him, and a dozen hands tore him from the General's grip. As he was flung out into the middle of the street, Maxwell caught one last glimpse of Marjorie Danton's eyes, and in that second he knew that she recognized him. Heartsick, he staggered down the road, hoping against hope that the General would keep silence—that she would never know what place he had come from.

"I hadn't counted on such a thing as this," he muttered brokenly to himself. "I'll have to explain in the morning—but how can I? The secret is not mine to explain, even to him. God!"

Yet—there must be an explanation, he knew full well. Either that or he must resign from the service. Resign from the thing that claimed his life—from the game that he had played all these years!

"I will find a way," he whispered to himself. "I will see him in the morning—and—and he must wire Simla. That is the only way! No one else knew me. But—that is impossible!"

When he reached his bungalow he found that his comrade, Major Hinman, had not yet returned from the palace, but Madho Rao was waiting. Pulling himself together, he managed to give all his attention to the little Ghurka's tale for the moment.

This was brief and to the point. Obeying his orders, the Ghurka had gone to the shop of Jani. He had found it empty save for the figure of the old Persian, stabbed to the heart, his tiny forge extinguished by his own blood. Evidently Amir

Jung had done his work quickly, and as soon as Maxwell had left the place.

"The police have taken the matter in hand?" he asked. The Ghurka nodded. "Then you will say that you discovered it by accident——"

"It is said, protector," returned the other.

"Good, Madho Rao!"

When Major Hinman entered, Maxwell, washed and in undress uniform, was just making ready for bed. Hinman was still chuckling.

"Funny thing, Maxwell! Danton's carriage broke down just at Lallaji's house as some native chap was coming out. Fellow bumped into the General and—well, no one seems to know exactly what happened, but the old man was bally well wrought up. One or two chaps think it was attempted assassination, but Manners, who was there, swears that's all rot, and that the fellow was more mixed up than any one else. Queer, eh—what?"

"Deuced odd!" said Maxwell. "Turn out the lamp for me, old chap, will you?"

CHAPTER IV

A MESSAGE FROM MIR KHAN

WHEN Maxwell strode into headquarters after parade the marks of a sleepless night were stamped on his features. The aides hailed him quickly.

"Hello, old chap! Not lookin' so fit this morning!" cried Ballantyre.

"Where were you last night, hermit?" inquired Manners, who was acting as extra aide-de-camp. "Lay you odds you were riding up the pass or around the plains!"

"You win," smiled Maxwell, with a glance toward the door. "Take in my name, Ballantyre, like a good fellow."

"You missed the fun last night," chuckled Manners, as Ballantyre moved away.

"Hinman told me," returned Maxwell quietly. "Thought it was assassination."

"Bally rot! A drunken Afridi, that was all——"

"Nothin' of the sort! He had pistols——"

"The General knew who he was, they say——"

Maxwell smiled and pushed through to follow the beckoning Ballantyre.

"All right, Major Maxwell. You are to go right in."

A moment later he was nodding to Campbell, the chief political agent, just leaving. Then he faced General Danton, alone in the room. Their eyes met in silence during an instant, until Maxwell spoke.

"I beg to report, sir, that in case it becomes necessary to send a punitive expedition against——"

"Stop that blamed nonsense!" burst from the haggard-faced old General fiercely, as he began to pace up and down. "What the deuce were you doing last night, Raymond? Oh, my boy—my boy!"

At the abrupt change in his voice, and the sight of the bronzed hands that gripped each other in anguish, Maxwell winced. He felt as if struck a physical blow, and his cheeks paled, though his voice was steady and grave as ever.

"General Danton, I regret with my whole heart that the unfortunate meeting took place. I—I cannot explain it now, sir. I can merely assert that in case we send an expedition against Mir Khan, I can guide it to the Tulwar's Hilt."

The other stopped abruptly and gazed at him. Grey eyes and blue held each other for a full minute in silence. Would the General understand? Maxwell watched anxiously as the bronzed face before him changed under the play of emotion.

"There are things I have puzzled over, Raymond. Your long hunts, your leaves ordered from Simla, your knowledge of the hill dialects—yes, it would fit in." He spoke slowly, searching Maxwell's face with anxious eyes and lowered brows. Suddenly his face cleared; he strode up to Maxwell and laid his hands on the younger man's shoulders.

"Raymond, I was struck to the heart last night. I ask your pardon, for I think that I understand now; most unfortunately, Marjorie does not and cannot. Even were we to explain things to her, which is impossible, she would never grant it right for you to have been in such a house."

"Then—then she knew, sir?" asked Maxwell, feeling as if an icy hand had clutched suddenly at his heart. The General nodded.

"She had heard of the house, it seems. Mrs. Danton knows nothing of the recognition, of course, nor do any others. I will do my best for you with Marjorie, boy, but she has received a cruel blow. Only time can heal that, and, perhaps, knowledge. Now let us dismiss the matter, Raymond. What's this about Mir Khan?"

"One of his men murdered Jani, the silversmith, last night, sir. At least, I believe the man was one of his, although apparently an Afghan. He must have fled the city at once, for he has vanished this morning."

"The political agent was telling me of the murder," and Danton gazed keenly at the Major. "But he knew nothing of all this. As for Mir Khan, we must haul him over the coals when he comes into the city—he may be in to-day, for he never misses the polo and usually spends a week here. That's great work about the Tulwar's Hilt, Raymond. Are you sure?"

Maxwell nodded quietly. "Absolutely. One other thing, General. The trouble-breeder is there at present."

General Danton whistled reflectively. "So I inferred from the present of the kukri the other

night. Well, Raymond, we will have to go slow in that quarter. Now, as to Marjorie, I confess that I do not see how you are to right yourself there, short of explaining to her things that even I have barely guessed at. And that is out of the question."

"Yes, sir, I am afraid so. I have done wrong in hinting to you—but—you understand, I think."

"Yes, my boy, I do," and their hands met in a grip that brought comfort to Maxwell's heart. "Come over to the bungalow for luncheon, Maxwell. Things may not be so bad as they look. It's—er—rather a delicate question, you know. If you've nothing more important, wait and ride over with us. It's nearly time for tiffin now."

"Thank you, sir," replied Maxwell simply, and returned to the group of aides. As these, according to custom, made their home with the General, he knew that the luncheon would be more than a family party, and looked forward to it with some anxiety.

Not even to himself did he acknowledge the shrinking dread with which he rode up to the General's bungalow. Conscious innocence was no sustainer in this emergency. In the eyes of Marjorie Danton he knew full well that he was branded—branded with a brand that no girl could forgive; and the horror of it all was that the thing could not be spoken of.

"I could explain it all in five minutes," he groaned to himself, throwing his reins to a sais and saluting the sentry with the rest. "But at least she won't spread the news, like some others of these garrison cats. She's not that kind, thank God!"

With Mrs. Danton and Marjorie was young Archibald, who was related to "influence," and therefore was honoured with occasional invitations, though a civilian in the political agent's office. He shook hands with Maxwell shamefacedly, brightening up instantly as the officer greeted him cordially. It was not in Maxwell's heart to treat any man harshly at that moment.

For he had been struck a blow. Marjorie Danton had treated him as the rest—a smile and a handshake; only he had seen the involuntary movement of shrinking as she had put out her hand to his, only he had sensed the forced words of welcome, and his face was pale as he followed the ladies inside. The General had been right. She would not forgive this thing—it had been a cruel shock to her, and she was not of the nature that lightly forgives such things in men.

"Well, I'll try to give her a hint," thought Maxwell desperately, finding that he was to sit beside her at the table. "This situation can't last for ever."

He had small chance, however. Marjorie deftly avoided any conversation, confining herself to Archibald, who sat on her right; and while she gave no intimation of coldness, Maxwell was unable to get beyond generalities. More than once he caught the eyes of General Danton watching his daughter with a troubled expression, but the old soldier was helpless.

"Do you think there's any chance of trouble with Mir Khan, sir?" asked Bobby Manners hopefully. The General smiled.

"I wouldn't advise you to do any betting

on the probability, Manners," he returned slyly, and there was a general laugh. "I was talking over things with Sir Forbes Campbell this morning," he added, becoming serious. "Mir Khan has been sent for, but he will present the usual excuses. We have no evidence against him, of course."

"Yet he is the overlord of all the Afridi hill chiefs," argued Maxwell. "These things would not be done so boldly unless they were confident of his backing. It's an open secret that Khotal Digar, his chief town, is only such nominally."

"Mir Khan has been given too many chances already!" exclaimed Ballantyre sharply. "That secret place of his, the Tulwar's Hilt, must be wiped out before these Afridis will believe that the British raj has any power. If you political chaps, Archibald, could only see that when we give these fellows rope they think we're weak, it would be a good thing."

"Campbell sees that, Ballantyre," the General reproved him. "He knows as well as we do that Mir Khan has collected all the anarchists of the hills and is behind all the raids that are going on. But these men are mere children, remember."

"Now, you must not 'talk shop,'" smiled Mrs. Danton. "I don't intend to have Mir Khan dinned into Marjorie's ears at every turn, so take warning!"

"Very well, my dear," laughed her husband. "Gentlemen, please to obey the commander of the commander! Mir Khan is taboo!"

If Marjorie was surprised that her father had

brought Maxwell to tiffin she gave no sign, nor could the troubled Major get behind her quiet reserve. So perforce he gave up the attempt for the present, and struck into conversation with the others.

"Anything stirring up at Kabul, Major Maxwell?" inquired Ballantyre.

"No," smiled Maxwell. "I had three months of quiet, with nothing more exciting than a little polo and the usual traders' disputes. I'm glad to be back again, though."

Archibald looked up quickly.

"Oh, you just came in from Kabul, didn't you, sir? By the way, did you hear anything while you were up there of the theft of a big ruby from one of the merchants going through? There was a fearful lot of fuss being made over it by some of the traders."

There was a little silence, for the cub had disobeyed the spirit of the recent "taboo." Maxwell was staring down at his plate.

"Yes," he said at length, in a low voice. "The stone was not found, but the thief was. He proved to be one—one of the Residence sepoys."

The others stared at him, for his voice had lost its usual firm ring. General Danton frowned in perplexity.

"We heard the echoes of the row, Maxwell. But there was more in it than appeared on the surface, I believe. You never can tell about these things, in this cursed land."

"No, you never can tell," repeated Maxwell softly. His eyes went to those of Marjorie, who quickly looked away, seeming not to notice the

dumb pleading in his face. Then he became himself again ; whatever the cause of his perturbation, it vanished with the shifting conversation, but more than one of those present remembered the fact.

His thoughts were bitter enough in the moments that followed, and he wished fervently that he was astride Caliph, sweeping down to the plains in a gallop that would cool his fevered thoughts and lend him discretion. Suddenly, looking through the window opposite, he saw the sentry without bring up his rifle. At the same moment a native stepped into his range of vision with a salaam. He watched idly.

A moment later the khitmatgar stepped softly to the side of the General and murmured in his ear.

"Eh? Who? Wait a moment." General Danton's gaze swept hurriedly around the table. "My dear, the khitmatgar tells me there is a man outside named Sirdar Fath—the lieutenant and messenger of Mir Khan. Would you mind if I had him in here? We may need Maxwell to interpret, you know."

"Not at all," answered Mrs. Danton. "Would you like us to——"

"By no means! Keep your seat, my dear. Khitmatgar, bring the man in."

Danton glanced at Maxwell with a frown. "Major Maxwell, have you ever heard that name? I'm blessed if I recognize it!"

Maxwell bent his brows. "Sirdar Fath?" he repeated slowly. "Why, no, sir! I am quite sure that I have not heard it before. And yet it's an odd thing if I haven't. I thought——"

He ceased abruptly as the native butler brought the messenger to the door. Sirdar Fath was very dark, even for an Afridi, and his snowy turban and garments heightened his swarthinness. Slender and wiry, when his face rose from the salaam to the officers, Maxwell saw that it was keen, fine-chiselled like most faces of the hills, and, for a wonder, clean-shaven. The sirdar uttered a few words, and General Danton turned to Maxwell.

"I wish you would translate for us, Major Maxwell. The beggar seems to have no English—I don't see why Mir Khan should have sent him, I'm sure."

"I will receive your message and give it to the protector," said Maxwell to the hillman. The latter salaamed again.

"My lord, Mir Khan sends greetings of health to the General sahib," said Sirdar Fath in fluent Pushtu, "and with the blessing of Allah will obey his invitation to-morrow. He has heard with great sorrow that hillsmen have attacked soldiers of the sirkar, and seeks permission of the sirkar to hunt down the slayers and destroy them utterly."

Hands crossed on his breast, the man stood like a statue of bronze, his dark eyes fixed with a glittering light on Maxwell, who translated the message.

Marjorie watched the man, for it was almost the first time that she had observed a real Afridi at close quarters. As he translated, Maxwell felt that the gaze of the sirdar had shifted, and looked up to find it bent respectfully upon the girl at his side.

"It is not allowed to stare at the ladies of

the raj," he commanded sharply. The man drew himself up as if defiant, but instantly lowered his eyes. The hint of boldness angered Maxwell, who knew the folly of allowing the least latitude in dealing with the natives, and he eyed the sirdar narrowly. But although there was an indefinable something about the man that struck a chord in his memory, he could not place him.

"As I expected," grunted General Danton. "Tell him to give my salutations to his master, Maxwell, and—by the way, ask him to be my guest at the Northern Army cup match to-morrow. A bit of polo, with a dress parade afterward, would be a good means of teaching the heathen something—eh?"

"Very, sir," answered Maxwell. "But I would suggest, if I may, that the parade be held the next morning. It's not well to rush these things, you know, sir."

The General nodded. "Right! Sir Forbes and I will have a little talk with his Highness to-morrow night over the murders. Tell him that."

The order was obeyed, and the petty chieftain heard the message with grave demeanour. The hillman is the aristocrat of all the native races of the north of India, and Sirdar Fath was no exception.

He bore himself very straight, and in his white robes was the personification of Oriental calm and inscrutable dignity. Once his eyes flickered from the face of Maxwell to that of Marjorie Danton, only to return in the same instant.

"I will bear the message of the General sahib," he answered calmly, with a low salaam, which, to

Maxwell's irritated mind, appeared rather directed at Marjorie than at the General. "My lord is at present in Khotal Digar, and will ride in to-morrow morning. He is exerting every effort to locate the criminals who attacked the servants of the sirkar, and is deeply grieved that such an outrage should have occurred."

"It is well, sirdar," responded Maxwell. With another deep salaam the man backed to the door, and for just an instant his gaze swept around the group; then he was gone, and the party broke into animated converse.

"Such a splendid-looking fellow!" exclaimed Marjorie Danton admiringly.

"They all are, my dear," laughed the General. "There is always fighting going on, you know—feuds and tribal jealousies, and these hillmen are a race of warriors."

"Pity we can't conciliate them and gain them over more," observed Maxwell thoughtfully. His voice dropped a trifle, and he turned to the girl at his right. "I have lived on the border a good many years, Miss Danton, and I have been in a good many queer places, but I give you my word that I would sooner be a captive in the Kabul prisons than be caught in disguise up in Khotal Digar or in the Tulwar's Hilt!"

No one but the girl had overheard the words, for all were discussing the coming of Mir Khan and the polo match on the following day. Marjorie looked at him with her frank, level gaze.

"Is it necessary that British officers should ever adopt a disguise, Major Maxwell?"

"Perhaps," he smiled gently. "You see, the

eyes of the raj must look into queer places at times. The Afghans say that when the panther would spy upon the ways of the tiger he must first paint his hide with stripes. That is a very true saying."

Their eyes met, and a glow of colour came into the cheeks of the girl. Maxwell knew that she had understood, and hope leaped into his heart. Would she accept the explanation as her father had accepted it that morning? He tried in vain to fathom her look, until she turned suddenly to Archibald, who was chattering rapidly with Mrs. Danton on the subject of hunting.

"Mr. Archibald," she inquired, and he turned instantly to her. "I wish you would tell me something, for you know I've only just come out. I've heard so much about the life on the border, and the Secret Service; tell me, is that all true?"

"Greatly exaggerated, Miss Danton," he returned promptly, with a wave of the hand, unheeding the stern gaze of Maxwell. "Believe me, half the talk one hears is tommy rot."

"But don't the Secret Service men and even army men find it necessary sometimes to dress as natives, and all that?" she persisted, with a little grimace. "It's terrible to have all one's ideals shattered like this!"

"Not a bit of it, Miss Danton," Archibald laughed self-consciously. "We do all that, you know—the political agents and Intelligence Department. The army is here to fight, and we are here to do the scouting, so to speak."

And as Maxwell rode away after tiffin, he cursed the officious cub very heartily, for Marjorie Danton had not given him her hand at parting.

CHAPTER V.

FOR THE NORTHERN ARMY CUP.

THE dusty road that led to the polo-grounds was thronged with soldiers, natives, hillmen, and all the motley throng that Northern India turns out to her polo matches. No one loves the game so keenly as the native, be he Afghan or Bengali, and this was to be the greatest match of the year.

Underneath the mere polo excitement, however, was something deeper, more subtle; Maxwell sensed it in the salutes of the passing soldiers and the half-admiring, half-insolent looks of the groups of Pathans. For Mir Khan had duly arrived that morning, and with his coming Peshawur had begun to stir in unrest.

More than one bet was swiftly laid as Maxwell passed, sitting loosely in the saddle and thinking deeply. Was not the Major sahib to captain the Lancers' team against the Twelfth Dragoon Guards in the final for the cup? And was not the Major sahib a master of the game, accurate of eye and sure of wrist above all others? So spoke the admiring Ghurkas, and hastened to back their champion with all they could rake and scrape.

"I have seen the Dragoons play at Bunna," spoke a stalwart Afridi wisely. "They be all-conquerors, therefore I will bet on them."

A Sikh took him up quickly, and the two all but came to blows. Sikh and Afghan have been enemies since the Sikhs bathed Lahore in the blood of swine, and only the swift interference of Maxwell caused the knives to be sheathed sullenly.

As he rode into the grounds he saw the General's carriage drive up before the club and caught a glimpse of Marjorie with Ballantyre in the front seat of the open landau. Maxwell, with an effort, restrained the impulse to ride over, and centering all his thoughts on the match, rode over to the shed where his string of ponies were being made ready for the match. Ahead of him was Lieutenant Reeves, his number one.

"All fit, Maxwell?" smiled the burly, quick-witted Reeves.

"Quite, thanks. Bad business, this. We should have more ponies. The Dragoons will have fresh mounts for every chukker, Reeves."

"We are richer than the Dragoons in skill, if not in worldly goods," laughed the other unconcernedly. "At all events, you will have a fresh string; the rest of us will have to play the last four with tired ponies. All the more glory in winning—eh?"

Maxwell smiled grimly as he examined the horses, giving directions to the saises as to the order in which he would play them. He alone of the team had six mounts, the others having but four apiece, for the Lancers were not the richest regiment in India by any means.

"Hello, there we are!" exclaimed Reeves. The band had broken short off in its lively air and was now blaring out "God Save the King." Turn-

ing quickly, Maxwell saw the political agent, with Mir Khan in the back seat of the landau, drive up in front of the pavilion.

"Look after the ponies, Reeves, will you?" he said. "I want to have a look at Mir Khan."

Reeves nodded, and Maxwell sauntered over to the pavilion. A moment later the grinning Manners appeared, pushing through the crowd.

"The General sent me for you, Major," he said briskly. "Any special word on the betting? Feeling pretty fit?"

"Take everything you can get," laughed Maxwell. "We're rather short on ponies, but otherwise things look pretty well."

Manners nodded. A few moments later Maxwell was raising his polo helmet in salute to the General.

"Good afternoon, sir! Cracking good day for the match, isn't it!"

"It couldn't be better," smiled the General. "I'd like you to have a look at Mir Khan. Come along—Sir Forbes has him in tow, I think."

He led the way along the veranda of the pavilion to where Sir Forbes and Mir Khan were the centre of a knot of curious officers and civilians. Maxwell saw Mir Khan engaged in animated converse with Marjorie, then found himself clenching his hands grimly as she negligently turned her back.

"Sir Forbes," began the General, "I want you to make Major Maxwell known to Mir Khan."

Campbell greeted Maxwell cordially, then turned and touched the Afghan's arm.

"Pardon me, Miss Danton, but I want Major Maxwell to meet Mir Khan."

Marjorie and the hill chieftain turned to the

officers. Marjorie nodded slowly, a curious expression in her eyes that made Maxwell wonder. Mir Khan gravely salaamed, and over his shoulder Maxwell caught a glimpse of Sirdar Fath, immobile, intent.

Mir Khan affected none of the gay shawls and gold-banded turbans of other chiefs. He had fought his way up in the world of the hills, and he was one who said little and did much—a man of Maxwell's own stamp, in fact.

He himself was said to be the finest rifle shot north of Kabul, and by the filled cartridge-pockets sewed in his shirt Maxwell guessed that his rifle was not far away. But except for the splendid sword at his side, Mir Khan might have been a simple hillsman, with plain home-spun garb and black, beaded turban, while on his feet were palm-leaf sandals that might be bought in the bazaars for one anna.

In the face of the man lay his power—strong, clean-shaven, indomitable, with conscious dignity and strength in every line. The eyes of the two met and gripped for an instant, then Mir Khan's white teeth flashed out.

"I think we have met before," he said, in his precise, slow English. "Let me see—was not our last meeting in Kabul, Major sahib?"

Maxwell assented lightly, but his eyes were troubled. Marjorie was watching the meeting between these two, as were the others, with deep interest. Each was a "man among men," as the hill phrase goes; each had done great things in his own way, and each was a hero among his own people.

"Mir Khan has a good memory for faces," said Maxwell quietly. "We have met in other places also, I think."

He checked himself quickly as he caught the calm gaze of Sirdar Fath from behind and turned to the political agent.

"I think it is time to start the game, Sir Forbes. If you will excuse me, I will get my tear out on to the ground."

Marjorie turned to him. "Are you going to win, Major Maxwell?"

"I trust so," he smiled, trying to read the curious light in her eyes. "It will be a hard battle, though; the Dragoons have a fine team."

"Good luck to you!" she said softly. For a moment her face lit up; then the expression passed as Maxwell raised his hat, turned, and strode away. But a laugh and the words of Mir Khan floated to him as he went—

"Maxwell sahib knows the game—who better?"

Resolutely crushing out all thoughts of that group in the pavilion, Maxwell flung himself into the work ahead with fierce energy. The hard, dusty polo-ground was lined with the thousands of soldiers, and behind these were the carriages, the parasols, the gay dresses, and uniforms; while from the native enclosure came storms of cheers and wild cries of applause as the two teams cantered out for practice.

Maxwell pulled up and dropped a ball. With a supple, quick swing of his mallet he drove the ball clean and true toward the distant goal-posts. Galloping after it, another stroke sent it between the posts and drew a roar of delight from the men

of his regiment, who lined the far side of the boundary. A few moments later the two umpires in their light dust-coats cantered out and the teams lined up.

"No need for orders," said Maxwell to his team, his eyes kindling as he looked them over. "The Dragoons have two new players, while we know each other pretty well. That will help out tremendously."

The other three nodded confidently and took their places. The great crowd fell into tense silence as the umpires looked about; then the whistle sounded, the ball was thrown in, and the Northern Cup match was on.

With a single stroke Reeves, number one for the Lancers, pounced on the ball and drove it toward the enemy's goal. For the next moment the galloping hoofs and the hard echo of mallet hitting alone broke the silence; up and down the field raced the two teams, each playing superbly, Maxwell putting up a steady game at back and feeding his three forwards cautiously.

Then out of the jumble of horse and man and the canopy of grey dust suddenly broke two of the Dragoons, the ball well in front of them. Number one drove it with a powerful wrist-stroke straight at Maxwell.

Catching it in full flight on his mallet, Maxwell rose in his stirrups, leaned over, and sent the ball back past the centre of the field amid a wild roar from the crowds.

His number three raced it down the field toward the Dragoons' goal; then the Lancers sent up a howl of dismay as the Dragoons' back stopped the ball and cracked it past Maxwell.

Wheeling Caliph, the Lancers' captain raced down the field. But before he could get on the ball, the Dragoons' forwards had picked it up and driven it between the posts. The whistle blew, drowned in the outburst of applause and dismay, and biting his lips in chagrin, Maxwell galloped back to the mat-roofed stables. The first chukker was over.

With the start of the second chukker it was plain to all men that the Lancers had a new mode of attack. As the ball was thrown in, a young subaltern drove it with all his strength and followed it like a cat on a mouse, one and three close on his pony's heels, fanwise.

Then, leaning well over his pony's neck, number two shot the ball under his mount to the far boundary. The Dragoons' three forwards tore down upon it, but Maxwell's number three had it before they could reach him, and dribbled it up the boundary. A quick stroke under his pony's head, and the ball flew across to the expectant Reeves, who deftly evaded the opposing back and sent the sphere bouncing through the Dragoons' goal.

The wild uproar from the native Lancers which greeted this skilful attack brought a grim smile to Maxwell's lips. There were six more chukkers to be played yet, and the last four would be played on tired mounts.

"Save your ponies all you can," he cautioned his team as they rode in. "Keep the best for the last, of course. That's when the tussle will come, and we'll have to use our heads to hold them until then."

"We've had fearfully good luck so far," grinned

Reeves cheerfully. "I didn't think that play would go through so easily. If we can only hold 'em!"

"We will," returned Maxwell, his face set in determined confidence. "Play up together and conserve your strength."

The next chukker was productive of play at close range, for the Dragoons had learned the danger of giving the Lancers a chance to break out into open play. For several moments all clustered over the ball in the centre, while Maxwell watched anxiously from the outside.

For a long time the ball seemed lost in the dust-cloud; then from the struggling mass of hoofs and sticks trickled the white sphere. Like a flash, Maxwell drove down and took it at an angle before the others caught sight of it.

Up the field he raced, the hard smacks of the mallet sounding sharply above the pounding of the horses, while the watching thousands cheered wildly. This was indeed a run!

Within twenty yards of the goal Maxwell rose in his stirrups for a last hard, swinging stroke. But the ground had been new-watered; his pony slipped with the stroke and came down heavily with him, while the opposing back drove the ball to safety.

Maxwell rose slowly to his feet, unhurt but badly shaken, and examined his pony anxiously. To his dismay, he found the animal dead lame with a strained tendon, but, fortunately, time was called. Blackened by dust, with breeches cut at the knee, he led the pony back toward the running saises.

"Not hurt, Maxwell?" called the General, as he passed the pavilion.

"Not at all, thanks, sir. Pony's dead lame, though."

As he looked up into the faces on the veranda he caught a glimpse of Sirdar Fath once more, standing behind Marjorie. Mir Khan, too, was paying close attention to the girl, and beneath its mask of dust Maxwell's face hardened, for Marjorie's eyes had been cold as they met his.

"I'm going to win that cup!" he muttered grimly, as he came up to the rest. "Reeves, get 'em rattled if you can. Stand over the ball, and save your own beasts."

During the fourth and fifth chukkers the Lancers played a strong defensive game, and put his orders into practice. In consequence, the speedier Dragoons grew wilder, and when they got the ball away from the scrimmages Maxwell was there to head them off each time.

The Dragoons were crack individual players, but no personal brilliancy makes up for playing a lone hand, and as their ponies grew rattled they lost their teamwork.

"After them!" commanded Maxwell as they rode out for the sixth, and his men flung themselves into a savage attack that surprised the Dragoons by its furious speed. After a bit of close play in the centre, Reeves sliced the ball to the boundary.

Number three raced after it, saved it from going out, and drove it to number two. The latter swept it on to Reeves, with the bewildered Dragoons close behind it. The long, bouncing drive across the field gave them time to rally.

Maxwell, who followed up Reeves, barely avoided the furious, tangled mass of the Dragoons

as they swept down on Reeves. The latter waited, and the maddened ponies took the game into their own hands.

As Maxwell received Reeves's clean backhander, the Dragoons crashed together in a mass and struck Reeves ; Maxwell sent in the ball for a clean goal, and with anxious face turned to the huddle of kicking horses and cursing men.

"Got me, old chap," groaned Reeves, stumbling to his side with a limp arm. "Wrist smashed."

One of the Dragoons' ponies had been bowled over with a broken leg in that mad, whirlwind dash, but no other injuries had resulted. A deep breath of relief surged up from the crowds, followed by cheers for the plucky Lancers' number one as he walked off the field. But the Lancers' team assembled with anxious faces, for Reeves's place must be filled by a young subaltern, and the outlook was bad indeed.

Their fears were justified in the seventh. Maxwell, by brilliant play at back and careful feeding of his forwards, managed to keep the ball out of his goal until within the last minute of time.

Reeves's place was weakened greatly, however, and the result was that the Dragoons secured another goal, equalling the score in the last few seconds of play.

Maxwell, desperate, kept the game flickering back and forth in the final chukker. Suddenly one of the Dragoons secured the ball and sent it hurtling through the air for a goal.

Maxwell heard it whistle like a frightened pheasant straight above him. Rising in his stirrups, he dropped his reins and gripped his

stick in both hands and drove overhead at the ball in the fashion learned at Munniphore.

There was an instant of silence from the excited crowd, and then the whole mass of natives and Europeans went wild. For the stick had caught the ball in mid-air and driven it straight out of the ground, saving the goal which must have been scored.

Swiftly Maxwell galloped off and secured another stick, his own having been broken by that lucky stroke, and now he abandoned all defence in a determined effort to rush the enemy.

From the throw-in he got the ball and raced down the boards, closely followed by three of the Dragoons. There was barely half a minute of time left ; his eyes were clogged with dust and his wrist red and lumpy ; but his brain was clear as ever.

With clean blows he sent the ball to the corner post, and with a superb stroke over the pony's near side sent it under him for the mouth of the goal.

His number one was ready, anxious to redeem himself. A tap, and the ball rolled into the goal just as the whistle sounded. Maxwell's last play had won the cup by the narrow margin of one goal !

Roar upon roar of cheers almost drowned out the discordant band of the Irish Fusiliers, natives and Europeans giving way to a wild frenzy of delight. Maxwell rode slowly to the stables and handed over his pony ; then, collecting his team, he led them to the pavilion where Mrs.

Danton was to present the Northern Army Cup to the winners.

As he climbed the steps of the pavilion his eyes met Marjorie's, but there was no hint of congratulation in hers, though she was flushed with excitement. Beside her stood the General and Sir Forbes, Mir Khan and Sirdar Fath just behind.

Raising his helmet, Maxwell stood in awkward silence while the General eulogized the winning team, praising the brilliant work of the captain in particular.

Maxwell's smile faded as he stepped forward to receive the cup, for Marjorie was as embarrassed as he was, and added nothing to the conventional words of congratulation.

As he took the cup in both hands the Fusiliers' band struck up "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," and as Sir Forbes and the General shook hands with his team-mates Mir Khan stepped forward.

"May I be permitted to add my congratulations, Major sahib?" he asked, smiling.

"Thank you, Mir Khan," returned Maxwell quietly. "It is too much of a fuss to make altogether, and Reeves really deserved the credit."

The chieftain turned to Marjorie as the three stood alone for a moment. "The Major sahib is very modest, Miss Danton. By the way, did he ever tell you of the wonderful ruby he got in Kabul?"

Beneath the dust Maxwell went white to the lips. He glanced about, but the others were paying no heed. Only Marjorie noted the sudden pallor and the quick glance.

"What ruby do you mean?" he inquired sternly. Mir Khan smiled sweetly.

"The ruby of the trader, Major sahib. Ah! you remember now?"

"I do *not* remember," returned Maxwell evenly, and once more his eyes gripped those of the hill-man in a hard stare. Then Sirdar Fath gave a single laugh, Mir Khan turned his back, and Maxwell caught a slight glance of contempt from Marjorie Danton.

"By the way, Maxwell," broke in the voice of the General, "I wish you would be present to-night when Sir Forbes and I discuss the hill situation with Mir Khan. Nine sharp, at my bungalow."

"Very good, sir," muttered Maxwell. "I will be there."

But as he passed down with his comrades to receive the plaudits of the crowd his heart was very sore and bitter, for he knew that Marjorie Danton had seen through his lie.

CHAPTER VI

MIR KHAN TALKS THINGS OVER

MAXWELL was in no pleasant frame of mind as he rode away from his bungalow that evening. At the last moment his unpleasantness was increased by his Rissaldar Major reporting that two sentries had been stabbed and their rifles stolen, almost in broad daylight. Consequently his usual calm poise had departed ; and when the poise of an officer departs he had best not forgather with natives.

“ Out of the way ! ” he ordered angrily as an old Pathan, his wife, and his evidently sick daughter, bound to a mule, straggled across his path. His eyes falling on the girl, Maxwell drew rein. “ What is this? Where go you? ”

“ Officer sahib,” returned the hillman, “ I go into the city to seek the hakim sahib. My daughter is ill, and my name is Mir Zada.”

“ Ill? Of what disease? ” snapped Maxwell, guessing instantly.

“ The smallpox, sahib.”

“ Thou fool ! Has she not been vaccinated? ”

“ *Ai !* ” The hillman drew himself up proudly. “ Is it not known that the sahibs seek in that manner for a girl with milk instead of blood in her veins, that they may carry her to England

and sacrifice her? Nay, vaccinated she is not, nor shall be."

Maxwell turned to his sais in a flame of anger.

"Go bring Rissaldar Major Pir Karim and six men! Take these three to the hospital, and on your head see that they escape not!"

The sais galloped off and Maxwell sat his horse grimly, watching the angered Mir Zada.

"Major sahib, I have seen you before," said the hillman. "*La ilaha illa lahu!* God is great, and there are rifles in the hills. Mir Zada will remember, Major sahib."

Without comment Maxwell turned his horse and rode on in bitter thought. He had made the mistake of a cub just out from England, and the remembrance was not sweet.

The rifles of Mir Zada and his kinsfolk would be waiting for him by day and night; but there were many rifles waiting for Maxwell sahib, and this worried him little. It was the thought of his own loss of self-control, into which he had been goaded by the trouble in his mind and by the words of Mir Khan, that rankled deep.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "This won't do, old man! You can't afford to enter this contest of wits in such shape as that. Come, brace up!"

Contest of wits it would be, indeed—wits of political agent and soldier matched against the keen brain of the Afridi chief. But Maxwell pondered as he rode. Who was this Sirdar Fath?

The dim familiarity of the man's face puzzled him. More, how did Mir Khan know the story of that ruby, even now sewed in the tunic of the

Lancers' major? Could that tale have come from the agile mind of the sirdar?

Maxwell wore a troubled frown as he entered the bungalow and joined the personal staff of the General. The genial Manners greeted him jovially.

"Cleaned out the Dragoon Guards' mess to-day, Major," he announced, waving his ever-present betting-book. "Great game, sir!"

"Glad it suited you," said Maxwell dryly, nodding to the rest. "Am I late or early?"

"The General is waiting for you," answered Ballantyre. "Mir Khan and his sirdar just came up."

Five minutes later the council was assembled. Mir Khan's face was serene as ever, the light-hued, virile features in strong contrast to those of the dark Sirdar Fath who stood at his side. Maxwell was motioned to a seat between Sir Forbes and the General.

"We might as well speak plainly, Mir Khan," began the political agent bluntly, his brick-red face set in stern lines. "You have authority over these hill ruffians, and it is time that these outrages were halted. Only this evening two of our sentries were stabbed and their rifles stolen."

A flicker of surprise crossed the powerful face of the chief.

"Campbell Sahib knows that the ways of God are immutable," he answered gravely. "If I find that two of my men have new Lee-Metford rifles, they shall be returned and the men punished. Can I do more?"

"You will have to do a great deal more!"

exclaimed Sir Forbes angrily. "Five men were killed outright in the pass only a few days ago by some thirty hillsmen. What move have you made in the way of punishing these men?"

Mir Khan stared across the table, and a defiant glint came into his eyes at the peremptory tone of the agent. Watching narrowly, Maxwell saw that the hand of Sirdar Fath was resting lightly on the back of his chair.

"I have made inquiries, as I promised the General sahib. These slayers were not of my people, sahib, nor can I find them. It is said that they were of the Khuial Khel Wazirs; but this I do not know."

"The Wazirs did not do this slaying, Mir Khan!" spoke up the General sharply. "Do not try to shift the blame to them."

"And how is the General sahib so sure of this thing?" rejoined the chieftain.

"Because the bullets that slew these men were jacketed, and, moreover, the slaying was seen."

For the first time Mir Khan's face showed swift expression. Then Maxwell saw a gentle movement of the hand that touched his back, and the chieftain laughed softly.

"The sahibs are very wise. However, as I have said, I could find out nothing."

A little silence reigned. Mir Khan met the steady eyes of the others without a quiver of his strong face, and Maxwell could not but admire the man.

"Major," said General Danton suddenly, "perhaps you could influence Mir Khan."

The dark eyes shifted to his face. Maxwell,

however, felt more restless under the gaze of Sirdar Fath than under that of his master.

"We have heard, Mir Khan," he began quietly, "that the Tulwar's Hilt is a very strong fortress, that it is well garrisoned and well defended by Russian guns. We have also heard that many gifts have come to you from Russia, and the sirkar does not understand."

At mention of the sirkar, the generic Afghan name for the British raj, Mir Khan smiled fleetingly.

"I rule in Khotal Digar, Maxwell sahib, and not in the Tulwar's Hilt. As for the gifts from Russia, I know not. Some few have failed to reach me."

Maxwell flushed quickly, and Mir Khan smiled blandly at the token that his shot had got home.

"You will have to settle this thing here and now, Mir Khan," said Sir Forbes. "It is well known that you rule at the Tulwar's Hilt as well as at Khotal Digar, and some day an expedition will wipe the Tulwar's Hilt out of existence. But in the meantime these outrages will have to be stopped. If you will not do it, the sirkar will."

Mir Khan's eyes flashed forth, but Maxwell saw the hand close down once more on the back of the chair.

"So we are dealing with the sirdar!" he thought, and spoke aloud before Mir Khan could reply.

"General, perhaps it would be more fitting that Sirdar Fath should be seated also."

The General looked inquiringly at him. But Maxwell caught a swift flash of hatred from Mir Khan, and knew he had struck home.

Danton caught the look also, and motioned to an empty chair, which Sirdar Fath accepted meekly. Mir Khan restrained himself with difficulty, then spoke with his usual calmness, a sneer in his tone.

"*Allahu Akbar* ! Maxwell sahib is too polite for us rude hillmen. I will do my best, Campbell sahib. But how is a free man of the hills to be restrained? See, none is more anxious than I to dwell in friendship with the sirkar, yet must I be blamed for every murder that is done on the border ! "

He fumbled at the folds of his chadar and brought forth the usual little book of Arabic prayers slung by a chain around his neck.

" Here in my *ganj-el-aris* have I made a prayer for the sirkar," he continued with growing volubility. " Would an enemy do this thing, Campbell sahib? Have I not brought in wrongdoers in times past? As for the Tulwar's Hilt, I know nothing of it. It is held by outlaws who give allegiance to no man, and if the sirkar bids I will lead my men against the place and raze it to the ground ! "

The man's voice rang with sincerity, and Maxwell could not but admire the magnificent face of the chieftain as he leaned forward earnestly. Moved by a sudden thought, he spoke out slowly, each word biting home—

" Firoz-u-din was crucified in the hills. Why? "

Mir Khan turned sharply, and for an instant wild hatred flamed out in his eyes. Before he could reply, however, Sirdar Fath spoke, calmly and evenly.

"By his own people, Maxwell sahib. He was an apostate—a believer in Hazrat 'Esa, who denied the true God. Therefore his brethren slew him. Would the sirkar interfere in the religion of the hills, sahib? "

Maxwell bit his lips at the keen glance the sirdar shot at him. He had lost, and doubly. He had betrayed his own knowledge of Firoz-uddin, while the vexed question of religion had been subtly introduced. Sir Forbes, however, interfered.

"This is beside the question, Mir Khan. What assurances will you give us that in future these outrages will be swiftly punished, if not prevented? "

"Any in my power, Campbell sahib." Mir Khan had now regained his lost poise, and spoke earnestly and frankly. Maxwell's eyes, however, were fastened on Sirdar Fath. Very slowly his recognition of the man was growing. Somewhere, somehow, he had seen that steel-jawed face before, and he groped blindly through the pigeon-holes of his memory.

"In proof of my devotion, General sahib, I have brought a small gift which I would present to the Miss Sahib, your daughter."

There was a new light in Mir Khan's face, a light that startled Maxwell, as the chieftain laid a small lacquered box on the table. For a moment there was silence.

Sirdar Fath, staring at his master in evident surprise, half made a gesture and then leaned back. Maxwell had flushed an angry red; Sir Forbes and the General were frowning, but the political agent cast a slight nod at Danton. Max-

well knew that at this juncture they could not run the risk of offending the chieftain, yet the purpose of his gift was obvious to all.

"Captain Ballantyre," said the General slowly and with evident distaste, "I think you will find Miss Danton in the parlour. Will you kindly inform her that Mir Khan wishes to speak with her?"

Ballantyre saluted and withdrew. Manners frowned blackly, but Mir Khan leaned back, placid as ever. A moment later Ballantyre ushered in Marjorie, and the Afridi chief rose with a deep salaam. With a few well-chosen and respectful words Mir Khan presented the box, and not even Maxwell could find anything offensive in his manner.

"Why—I—it is not our custom to accept presents from—from men," stammered the confused girl, with a glance at her father. Plainly against his will, the General nodded, while Mir Khan beamed placidly. Maxwell's eyes went to the sirdar, who was looking at Marjorie.

Hesitatingly, the girl opened the box and drew out a ruby pendant with a little cry. As the gem glittered in the light Mir Khan salaamed again.

"So poor a gift is unworthy the Dur Jamala," he said softly. Maxwell's lips went into a tight line, for he alone of the officers present knew that the title meant "Beautiful Pearl." "Yet it is offered in respect and friendship, Miss Danton, and the stone is an old one, known to the men of the hills as 'The Sikh's Blood,' for it was taken from the Sikhs long years ago, and has an interesting history."

With the words Mir Khan flashed a single look at Maxwell, who sat astounded, unbelieving. A little silence fell on the room, broken by the General's whistle of surprise.

"By Jove! Is that the Sikh's Blood, Mir Khan? Why, the legend says that its owner shall be ruler of all the hills; surely you can't mean this!"

"Could the hills have worthier ruler than Miss Danton?" smiled the hill chief blandly. Sir Forbes glanced quickly at Maxwell, but the features of the latter were inscrutable. In the soft lamplight the native-cut gem shimmered dully, and Marjorie's eyes went to her father, whose face was troubled.

Again Mir Khan insisted that she keep the "trifle," and perhaps it was her swift look at the stern, tense face of Maxwell that decided her. She accepted the gift with a few quiet words that relieved the situation, and was gone. Mir Khan resumed his seat with a single triumphant glance at Maxwell.

But Maxwell said no word. Of all those present he alone knew that the Sikh's Blood was at that moment sewn into the breast of his own tunic.

"I believe that you were to offer us hostages?" said Sir Forbes without preliminary.

Mir Khan started. "Hostages? Have I not given my word? Is not the gift of the Sikh's Blood, the talisman whose holder could raise every village in the hills to revolt, proof of good faith? It was for this that I gave it, Forbes sahib! I will neither offer nor give hostages, for there is

no need. Ere two suns I will bring in the murderers of the two soldiers who were slain this night ; I swear it on the Koran. As for the other matter, I have already said that it was not done by my people."

"How know you that to-night's outrage was committed by your people?" asked Maxwell swiftly. Mir Khan darted a glance at the sirdar, who caught the appeal and replied—

"It is not known, Maxwell sahib. But whether or no, we will find the murderers. If necessary, we will make war ; but they shall be given up ere two suns pass. Is this not good? "

"It is good," declared General Danton emphatically. "I am glad that you have taken this decision, Mir Khan, for I confess that I doubted your good faith, but do so no longer."

Sir Forbes darted Maxwell a cynical look, and the junior saw that the honest old General had been completely taken in by the wily hillman. The General, however, was not altogether at peace with himself, and delivered a brief homily on the customs of the land.

"So you see, Mir Khan," he concluded gravely, "it was not well that my daughter should receive such princely gifts from you, this not being the custom of our women. What is done is done, but in future bear this word in mind, Mir Khan."

Maxwell sourly hoped that the chieftain would take affront, but Mir Khan only smiled blandly. Now more than ever the Major distrusted the half-scowling Sirdar Fath.

A jewel such as the Sikh's Blood is not given

away lightly and without due consultation, and for that matter it was a new thing for the Sikh's Blood to be given away at all. Yet was it the Sikh's Blood?

But for the little lump over his heart Maxwell could have sworn that the stone was the same he had stolen from the trader at Kabul, and was waiting to take to Simla in person.

"Very well," said Sir Forbes after Mir Khan had repeated his assurances, "we will accept your pledge that the murderers shall be brought in within two days. Now, there is to be a review of the army in the morning, and I wish you would be present as my guest."

Once again the eyes of the hill-chief kindled angrily at the thinly veiled command. Why had Mir Khan made that promise? thought Maxwell. Surely he had no intention of giving up any of his men; this would destroy his influence at once among the outlaws of the hills. Why, then, the two days?

But at a look from the sirdar, Mir Khan controlled himself and assented to the request of the political agent, and took his leave. He favoured Maxwell with a salaam and a look that spoke many things, while Sirdar Fath paused a moment, holding the portières back behind his master. Then the curtains fell, and the sirdar was gone.

That face—that face! Where had he seen it before? Maxwell leaned forward, his mind all but gripping the answer.

"Wish we could place that sirdar!" exclaimed Sir Forbes. "Sure you don't know him, Maxwell?"

"I do know him, sir," answered the other, his face tense. "I saw him at—at the—— Ah! The Afghan in the bazaar—the man who murdered Jani, the smith—by Heaven, I have it! He is the trouble-breeder himself!"

Almost before the words left his mouth Maxwell had whipped out his revolver and leaped up, his mind in a flame with the sudden recognition. As his chair went crashing back Sir Forbes sprang forward and caught his wrist.

"Hold on here! We'll have to make sure about this thing——"

"Let me go!" flashed out Maxwell furiously. "By the Lord Harry, what right have you to interfere in this——"

"Maxwell, are you mad?" thundered the old General. "Sir Forbes!"

"Careful, Major!" snapped the political agent sternly. "Remember that we are your superiors!"

"You? I work for higher superiors than you, sir!" retorted the infuriated Maxwell as Sir Forbes still blocked his path. "My superiors are above——"

He stopped abruptly, his fury gone before the expression in the faces around him. Once before, that same night, his bitter anger had led him astray, and now he cursed himself for a fool. But Sir Forbes was looking him straight in the eye, and Maxwell knew that his secret had been read.

"Ah! I thought so!" With the slow words the agent released his wrist. "Major, your pardon. You may go."

And without even a salute Maxwell whirled and dashed from the room.

CHAPTER VII

MAXWELL PREPARES A SURPRISE

SLIGHT as the delay had been, when Maxwell flung himself down the veranda steps and seized his horse's reins from the startled saises no one was visible on the curve of road that lay before the bungalow.

"Which way Mir Khan?" he demanded as he swung to the saddle. The saises pointed toward Peshawur, and he dug in the spurs. A moment later he sighted a single rider ahead.

At the sound of Caliph's clattering hoofs the lone figure turned. By the black turban Maxwell had already recognized Mir Khan, but did not trouble to hide the revolver in his hand.

"Where is Sirdar Fath?" he cried, drawing rein beside the chief. The latter looked at him unsurprised, with level eyes and flashing teeth.

"How should thy servant know, Maxwell sahib? I sent the sirdar to do an errand, while I looked at the mountains in the moonlight. Has some crime been committed?"

Maxwell returned the weapon to its holster, accepting his defeat quietly. He knew full well that he had lost his chance, and bitter as the knowledge was, there was still Mir Khan to deal with.

"You will return with me," he said curtly. "Sir Forbes Campbell wishes to see you again, for I recognized Sirdar Fath as the trouble-breeder."

Mir Khan laughed the defiant laugh of the hills.

"Is thy servant a Sikh, Maxwell sahib," he mocked, "that he should be sent for as a dog or a woman?"

"You had better come—unless you want me to bring you, Mir Khan!"

As Maxwell touched the arm of the other, he felt the swell of the great muscles. Mir Khan looked at him proudly, admiringly.

"*Ai*, Maxwell 'sahib, you are a man among men! I think some day we shall fight, you and I, and then there will be a fight worthy the name! I come."

As the two re-entered the bungalow Ballantyre darted out and sprang to his horse. Maxwell smiled grimly. The General was acting too late now; no sentry would ever catch the trouble-breeder.

"I have persuaded Mir Khan to return, General," he said, with a quiet salute. Sir Forbes came forward and took command of the situation.

"Mir Khan, we have reason to believe that your follower, called Sirdar Fath, is a Russian secret agent named Serge Petrovski. Where is he?"

"So Maxwell sahib said," smiled Mir Khan. "Unfortunately, I had sent him on an errand. But you are mistaken, Campbell sahib. The man is a hillman of the Marwat tribe, and has never seen Russia."

At this flat denial Sir Forbes turned to Maxwell, a troubled look in his eyes.

"Serge Petrovski," stated Maxwell quietly, "came into Peshawur two nights ago under the name of Amir Jung. He slew Jani, the Persian, across his own forge. I did not then recognize him, for I had seen him but once before, at Herat, under his own colours. That man is Sirdar Fath, and I will stake my reputation upon it."

Through the sudden quiet the incredulous laugh of Mir Khan rang clearly.

"I have known the man these ten years past, sahibs. Maxwell sahib is mistaken."

Sir Forbes looked keenly at Maxwell, who said nothing. He had no proof to offer, and once more came the bitter feeling that he had made a mistake, and a bad one this time. The political agent turned to Mir Khan.

"In that case we must ask your pardon, Mir Khan. I trust you will produce the man to-morrow to answer the charge in person?"

"Gladly, Campbell sahib, if he is still here. Unfortunately, Allah has afflicted his mind, and he may even now be in the hills. However, there is no harm done. I bear no ill-will, Maxwell sahib, to a brave man who has but done his duty. We be brave men, thou and I!"

Sir Forbes sank into a chair as the curtains fell, and looked up at the white-faced Maxwell. General Danton came forward hastily.

"'Pon my word, Maxwell, we have made a mess of things to-night!"

"Yes, sir," replied Maxwell bitterly. "I could have shot the man before he had got by the sentry, if——"

"If I had not held your arm," smiled Sir Forbes

wryly. "Of course, there is no doubt of his identity now, after what Mir Khan said. What is to be done?"

"If you will get leave from Simla, sir," replied Maxwell, "I will go on a hunting trip tomorrow. It will be close work, but—the game is big."

The others looked at him. Manners, in the background, was dimly beginning to comprehend the import of all that had passed, and was staring blankly at Maxwell. Sir Forbes nodded.

"Yes," he said slowly, "we must arrange it, General. I wish I had known of all this before, Maxwell; it would have simplified matters a good deal. However, your dealings are not with me, so no use crying over spilt milk. I think you may arrange your hunting things."

And with that word in his mind Maxwell rode home in bitterness, unalloyed by a single breath of sweetness. He had lost all. Petrovski knew he had been recognized, Mir Khan was on his guard, and Marjorie—at thought of Marjorie Danton he gave a groan.

"Curse that Sirdar Fath!" he growled, flicking the faithful Caliph with his whip. "That's where the story of the ruby came from, too! And his looks at Marjorie—I wonder if the dog of a spy would dare?"

However, his musings were soon cut short by sleep, for Maxwell was wearied out in body by the terrific struggle of the afternoon, and in mind by the no less terrific, if more silent, struggle with the Afridi chief.

With the morning, an orderly brought over a

short note from the General, requesting that he serve as "extra" on his staff for the day.

"Kindly give special attention to Mir Khan," it concluded. "Sir Forbes wired Simla late last night, and you may expect an answer this morning."

Maxwell smiled grimly as his eye swept across the parade-ground from the midst of the staff officers an hour later. There before him stretched the troops of the great northern army—Englishman, Irishman, Sikh, Ghurka, Pathan, side by side.

Something caught the bronzed Major of Lancers by the throat as he looked, for always when he saw the men on parade he would remember his first parade and his boyish sob as he led his first command to the salute.

To the left of the General and Sir Forbes rode Mir Khan. No word had been said of Sirdar Fath, and for the time the subject had been dropped. Unconsciously Maxwell urged forward until he trotted beside the Afridi chief, who turned with a bitter little smile.

"A brave show of power, Major sahib!" he said. "But in the hills they would be as children, knowing not what they would seek."

"Perhaps," and Maxwell laughed shortly. "Yet children can teach lessons to mullahs, Mir Khan. And these children taught lessons in the Chitral, the Malakhand, the Tirah, and the Waziri. It would be well for you to remember these things when you look upon such children."

Lips quivering, and fine face livid, Mir Khan turned his back, and Maxwell smiled to himself

as he glanced over the parade, at that moment being brought to attention.

General Danton led the way to the saluting base and reined in his charger beneath the Union Jack, the staff grouped around him.

Behind were the carriages of the wives and families of officers and civilians, for it was not often that they had an opportunity to see the pick of the Indian army in review. Maxwell saw Marjorie Danton with her mother in the General's carriage, and turned away quickly.

Accompanied by Sir Forbes and Mir Khan, and followed by his staff, the General rode out. As he started from the saluting base the stentorian voice rang out: "General salute! Present arms!"

As one man the regiments saluted, to the accompaniment of the massed bands, blaring out the first bars of the National Anthem. General and staff sat their horses at the salute, and with the last crash of the band the parade was brought with flash of steel to attention.

Slowly the party rode down the lines on inspection. Maxwell watched the guest of honour keenly, and saw that the formations had no little effect on him—though not as the General had hoped.

With the insensate pride of the hillman, Mir Khan's eyes kindled, and he sat his horse with new dignity. To oppose such an army as this was a great thing, and where could Afridi find nobler foemen? Maxwell shook his head sadly, for he knew well what thoughts were passing in the mind of the chieftain.

As they trotted back to the saluting base a trumpet rang out sweet and clear. One by one,

working from the right of the line, the troops wheeled into column, and, headed by their bands, marched past the General, saluting with the absolute precision of long practice. So perfect was the alignment that as the companies and squadrons passed not a break could be seen, and the steel flashed as if moved by clockwork.

"Have you ever seen a finer sight?" asked Maxwell, finding Mir Khan beside him.

"Magnificent!" exclaimed the Afridi, with frank admiration in his voice. "But how, Maxwell sahib, when they are pitted against the towering hills, each boulder backed by rifles, each gully defended by bullets?"

Maxwell laughed. "Still doubtful, Mir Khan? Well, time will tell."

"And these poor men?" Mir Khan swung his hand toward the lines of British infantry that were passing at the moment. "It is true the Indian troops can fight, for they are men of the hills also. But what of these?"

"Have they not proved equal to the test?" answered Maxwell, and the other fell silent.

Once past, the troops formed up at the far end of the parade-ground. A trumpet blared out, followed by a brisk order.

Out galloped the batteries of Royal Horse Artillery, followed in close order by the field batteries. Batteries in line, they swept past the saluting base, leaving a heavy cloud of dust, but racing as one man, one horse, one gun.

It was magnificent, and it drew an involuntary burst of admiration from the lips of the watching chieftain.

Following, the British cavalry regiments thundered past, squadrons in line, saluting as they passed with lances and sabres. Then with a yell of excitement the native cavalry swept down, excelling even the brilliant white troops in their abandonment to the fierce joy of the thing, and Maxwell's face lit up with infinite pride as his own Bengal Lancers galloped by with a rush and a thunder of hoofs.

Once more the troops were lined up, and the General rode out to make a short address. His praise of their appearance was no idle use of words, and his short speech came straight from his heart, for he loved the men of his command as they loved him.

"The day may not be far off," he concluded, with words that brought a thrill to every heart, "when there will be stiffer work than parading. See to it that you are ready then, as you are ready to-day."

He wheeled his horse, and the whole army raised helmets as one man and voiced their approval of their leader in a tremendous roar that was flung back again by the hills in eddying waves of echo. Maxwell glanced quickly at Mir Khan.

In the proud face he read a fleeting look of insatiable hate, mingled with fiery joy. The Afridi loved soldiery with all his heart—loved the pomp and pride of it—and loved the smell of powder and the flash of steel; none the less, there was keen joy in pitting his own splendid hillmen against such might as this, in pitting trap and stratagem against sheer valour.

"Thus runs the mind of the hillman," reflected

Maxwell, "and all the more so when the defiance is based upon the solid support and backing of secret Russia."

Sir Forbes Campbell looked around for Maxwell, and reined up beside him as the General led his staff over to the carriages.

"No word yet from Simla, Major," he said quietly. "There is an orderly waiting, and the moment it comes you will be set free. And—good luck, my boy!"

Their hands met for an instant, and Maxwell's heart leaped at the look he received from the grey-haired political agent. Blundered though he had, disgraced though he was in the thoughts of her whose respect he prized most of all, Maxwell thrilled to the quiet confidence that Sir Forbes gave him in that one glance.

A moment more and he was saluting the occupants of the carriages in the restrained fashion that had caused so many fair ones to term him "offish," although in reality Major Maxwell was anything but that.

He was watching Mir Khan, who had dismounted and was talking to Mrs. Danton and Marjorie, his stalwart figure to the full as soldierly as those of the uniformed men about him, when Maxwell saw a mounted orderly come galloping across the parade-ground to the side of the General.

His mind reverted to the words of Sir Forbes, and he looked eagerly as General Danton tore open a long official envelope. Even as the General glanced up, Maxwell had pushed his way to his side.

"Ah, here you are! This is your authority.

to take that shooting-trip, Major. You may leave at once if you wish."

"How long have Headquarters granted me, sir?" Maxwell asked, saluting, and not attempting to hide the eagerness that lit up his face.

"Three months, if you desire it," smiled the General.

"Thank you, sir. I'll leave to-night."

His words had carried to the group around the carriage of the ladies, and Mrs. Danton turned quickly to him, as did Mir Khan.

"Another hunting-trip, Major Maxwell?" asked the General's wife. Maxwell laughed and looked into the eyes of Mir Khan for an instant.

"Yes, Mrs. Danton. I've always wanted to get one of those markhor, you know."

"I could show you some excellent shooting, Major sahib," smiled Mir Khan softly. "If you would care to come up to Khotal Digar with me, I think you would be satisfied."

Few of those in the group caught the inner meaning of the words, and Maxwell only laughed again.

"No, thanks. I'm after one of those sheep trophies for the mess," he returned lightly, catching a twinkle in the General's eyes. After a few moments he urged his horse to the opposite side of the carriage, where sat Marjorie, chatting with Manners and Ballantyre.

"With your permission, Miss Danton, I would be glad to pay my respects this afternoon. I am leaving to-night on a shooting-trip in the hills, and may be gone for some little time. I may not don the tiger's stripes, but I hope to bring

back the tiger's skin," he added, with a smile, knowing that she would catch the allusion.

There was no great cordiality in her voice when she replied, however.

"We will be very glad to see you, Major Maxwell."

At that instant Maxwell saw upon her throat the ruby pendant—the Sikh's Blood. At his involuntary glance she reddened slightly, and he quickly bowed himself off to make his preparations.

As he rode toward the cantonments he was stopped by his Rissaldar major, Pir Karim. The Ghurka saluted, evidently bursting with news.

"Maxwell sahib will remember that he left three Pathans to be turned over to the hospital—a man and two women? It was last night."

"I remember, Pir Karim. What of them?"

"The man, whose name is Mir Zada, escaped early this morning, sahib. He refused to be quarantined, and all but stabbed the doctor sahib. It is said that he swore great vengeance upon the Major sahib."

"Very well," laughed Maxwell. "If the man won't be treated, he won't. There are plenty of rifles waiting in the hills, Pir Karim, and one more matters little. Send Madho Rao to my bungalow at once."

The Rissaldar saluted and turned toward the lines, while Maxwell rode on, whistling. Now, with work before him, he resolutely banished the bitter thoughts that had filled his mind, and promised himself that if his hunt was successful Marjorie Danton would soon know the real truth of things.

"This time things are different," he thought. "I've worked in the dark before, but now I have Serge Petrovski under my thumb. He is in the Tulwar's Hilt, no doubt, or perhaps in Khotal Digar; but in either case it is going to be the final struggle this time. If I win, well and good; the Empire will have been preserved. If I lose—why, Serge Petrovski wins, that is all."

His preparations were few and simple. Certain papers were to be destroyed, and before they had crumbled into ash Madho Rao appeared and saluted. Maxwell held out the little red notebook he had used in the house of Lallaji the Beautiful.

"Madho Rao, this little book is worth a lac of rupees to the breeder of trouble, and to the raj it is worth a great deal more. Take it to the house of the Beautiful this night—the password will admit you—and give it into the hands of Lallaji herself. She will understand."

The little Ghurka saluted and put the notebook inside his tunic.

"It has been whispered, Maxwell sahib, that you go shooting. Is it permitted that a servant accompany——"

"Nay," broke in Maxwell, with a smile. "It were not well for a Ghurka to venture into the Tulwar's Hilt, Madho Rao. No disguise could serve a Ghurka among Pathans. Besides, this is no ordinary trip. I go hunting for the Khan of all tigers, on whose head is set the price of ten lacs."

The eyes of the little Ghurka snapped excitedly, and Maxwell laughed again, for he knew that the

man was consumed with eagerness to accompany him.

Had it been possible to disguise those flat features and that alert little form, he would have asked no truer comrade than Madho Rao; but among the stalwart Afridis the man would have been doomed.

"You have received the word concerning Sirdar Fath?"

The Ghurka nodded.

"Then be silent and watchful. The beggar Shuja'at Din is in Khotal Digar; him will I send to you with word of what chances. That is all."

"Hearts of steel, those Ghurkas!" murmured Maxwell softly as Madho Rao vanished. "Some day the raj will have need of you, my friend, and you will die with a smile. Well, *la 'alla wala kowata!* There is no power but God, Madho Rao, and Raymond Maxwell is about to test the truth of that saying."

With which reflection Maxwell drew out his knife and carefully opened the lining of his tunic. From this he took something that glittered red in the sunshine, quickly wrapped it in a fold of cloth, added certain papers, and wrapped up the whole in a little packet, which he thrust into his pocket.

"Now for mess," he said as the bugle rang out the call, "and then I think we'll have a little surprise for Miss Marjorie—God bless her!"

CHAPTER VIII

MIR KHAN MAKES AN OFFER

AS Maxwell ascended the steps of the General's bungalow that afternoon he was met by the dapper figure of Bobby Manners. The older man had, like every one else, liked Manners for his happy-go-lucky, frank, boyish ways ; but now he perceived something new in the attitude of the other.

"Hello, Manners! Is Miss Danton about?"

"I—who—er—yes, of course! She—er—she told me she was expecting you, Major, and—and I had something I wanted to say to you—dash it!"

"Why, certainly, dash it with all my heart!" laughed Maxwell. The sight of the ever gay and debonair young officer stammering and blushing set him wondering.

Was this some new trouble—some new stroke from Fate's lash? At his cordial laugh Manners regained confidence, and they settled into two chairs side by side.

"Now fire away, old chap!" smiled Maxwell, accepting a nervously offered cigarette. "Let me play father-confessor to your heart's content. What's up?"

"It's beastly hard to say, Maxwell," and Manners gazed out at the sentry with troubled

eyes. After a moment he turned frankly to the other.

"I've learned a lot in the last day or so, Major," he burst forth impulsively. "I was like all the rest of them—I thought you were a regular Bayard and all that ; but I never dreamed that you were doing all this work *sub-rosa* for Simla. Well, that isn't what I want to say, either. I was talking to Miss Danton after tiffin—do you know, you're very like her? "

"Eh? " Maxwell was startled out of his calm for an instant, then he smiled. "Why? "

"Well, you are ; that's all. Dash it ! I can't explain—never was any good at psychology and all that bally rot. What I wanted to get at was this : Of course, Miss Danton said nothing direct ; but while we were talking about you I could see that there's something wrong—some screw loose. It's—it's beastly impudent, Maxwell ; but if there's anything I can do while you're off after Petrovski, if I can look after your interests here—oh, dash it ! You know what I mean."

"Yes." Maxwell spoke gravely, unheeding the red face and evident embarrassment of the boy. The penetration of his secret surprised him, for of all the garrison Manners was the last he would have thought capable of such acuity ; and the offer touched him deeply, even while it wounded him.

"Yes, Manners, I know what you mean, and I thank you. Not a bit impudent, old boy—nothing of the sort."

"That's awfully square of you, Major. I was just a bit afraid——"

Maxwell put out his hand silently, and the two

looked into each other's eyes for a second. Then their hands fell away, and they rose with the awkwardness of Britons who have encroached upon the preserves of things sacred.

"I'll—I'll tell Miss Danton you're here, Major."

He vanished hastily, and Maxwell looked after him with a half smile lighting his stern face and touching his eyes to kindness.

"Good old Bobby! 'The wise man lets the fools think him a fool,' as the Sikhs say. I rather think that your gold-rimmed monocle will hang on the ribbon of a D.S.O. yet, Bobby Manners—and I wish to God that some of those who have the order deserved it as much as you do!"

A moment later he threw away his cigarette as he heard Marjorie approach, and his face set into its old firm lines of repression. As she came out, not offering him her hand, he bowed.

"Sit down, Major Maxwell," she said quietly, accepting the chair he placed for her. "My father is talking with Mir Khan, who leaves to-night, and he wishes to see you before you go."

"Thank you, Miss Danton. You know that I may be gone for some time?"

"So I understand." Her level gaze met his squarely, without hint of compromise. "Perhaps you will bring back another ruby from the hills?"

"Perhaps." He smiled quietly, unheeding the thrust. "Is that not a bit ungenerous, Miss Danton? You hear a story from a native and condemn me unheard."

"I have no wish to discuss it, Major Maxwell. May I inquire what you wished to see me about?" she returned, a hint of weariness in her voice.

He bowed gravely, and took from his tunic the little flat packet.

"I am going hunting, Mss Danton—so much you know. I do not think I will bring back rubies this time, for I am going after rather big game. In fact, so big that there is quite an element of risk in it. As the chances of my safe return are, to say the least, rather hazy, I wonder if you will be good enough to take care of——"

She interrupted as he half extended the little packet.

"Major Maxwell, I do not think that I am the person in whom to repose your confidences. You have other friends in Peshawur whom you have known much longer, and it would be more fitting that you should seek their aid than mine. There is Captain Manners, for instance."

"Yes, Captain Manners," repeated Maxwell reflectively. "I think that, no matter what he saw or heard, Captain Manners would never allow his faith in a brother officer to be shaken—until the other was condemned by his General."

At the quiet, grave words the face of Marjorie Danton was suffused with colour. The rebuke went home, and as he watched the girl Maxwell felt an insane impulse to blurt out the whole story, to clear himself once and for all in her eyes. But his lips tightened, and when she spoke again he knew that he had won the tilt.

"What is it that you wish me to do, M'ajor Maxwell?"

"I wish you to keep this little packet, Miss Danton, and never to leave it out of your sight or touch. It is a matter of life and death and

honour—a matter that I could entrust only to a person in whom I had the most absolute confidence. In the event of my return, I will reclaim it ; if I should—not return, then I ask you to give the packet to your father, to be opened in secret. Will you accept it? ”

As Marjorie listened, meeting his grave eyes, her own had slowly dilated with surprise. He read a silent struggle in her face, and then she put out her hand in quick decision.

“ I will accept, Major Maxwell. I will not pretend that I am not honoured by such a confidence—nor will I pretend that I am glad to accept it from you. It is very hard to be a woman ; sometimes I wish I could look at things through the eyes of a man.”

The little lines about Maxwell's firm mouth deepened as he handed her the packet. The frank words extended him no false hopes ; he knew that Marjorie Danton had held court-martial within her own soul, and had rendered a verdict of guilty upon him. Nor could he blame her overmuch.

“ Thank you, Miss Danton,” he answered simply when she had tucked away the packet in the bosom of her dress. “ You might value the trust even more when I tell you that in that package is the ruby which I stole from the trader in Kabul.”

She gazed steadily at him, a mingling of emotions in her grave, thoughtful eyes. Maxwell knew little of women, but he knew that in those clear, grey eyes he was an outcast, and he leaned forward suddenly.

“ Miss Danton,” and there was a great earnestness in his voice and his face, “ you have been

very quick to think ill of me. You are fresh from England, with all her fixed rules and conventionalities, and not even you can see beneath the surface of India. Your father does so to some extent; could not the fact that he gives me no blame offset the blame that you give me? Believe me, I want your good opinion very much indeed, Miss Danton."

Her face paled slightly, and he guessed at the struggle in her mind before she replied in a low voice.

"It is hardly a matter for us to discuss, Major Maxwell. I am not a prude at all, but there are certain things that I cannot excuse. I admit that I do not understand India. It frightens me, and it repels me even while it attracts. You have hinted at an explanation of one event, and you heard what Mr. Archibald said when I applied for proof. As to this ruby, I think it was decidedly bad taste to make me the custodian of your loot; but, as I have accepted the responsibility, there is no more to be said."

She would have gone on, but at that instant the hearty voice of the General came from within, and she started, then rose to her feet.

"Here is my father with Mir Khan. I wish you good luck in your hunting, Major Maxwell, and I have no doubt that you will return safely. And now—no more heroics, please. I am not a schoolgirl."

Heroics! Maxwell's face burned as he rose to meet the General. So this was the end of all his explanation; this was all she saw in his hinted story, in his desperate clutching at straws!

She had not understood, and he realized bitterly enough that no other English girl could well understand in her place. Things that seemed patent and open to him were as behind locked doors for her. With a little bow in reply he turned to the doorway.

Mir Khan came out on to the veranda with General Danton, and Marjorie drew back from the group. The hill chief glanced from her to Maxwell and smiled. He wore his same simple, proud costume of the hills, but at his side hung a heavy, steel-hilted tulwar and a revolver holster.

"And when does Maxwell sahib leave on his hunt?"

"To-night or in the morning, Mir Khan. Do you think the hills will be safe?"

"Safe?" The chieftain laughed genially and glanced at Marjorie. "Why, I would wager that Miss Danton could ride alone and in perfect safety from Peshawur to Kabul! The hills are safe enough for sahibs. It is only we hillmen who must go armed, because of our feuds."

"There's no danger of Marjorie trying *that* ride," smiled General Danton, tugging at his moustache. Maxwell gazed gravely at Mir Khan. "By the way, Maxwell, Mir Khan assures me that there is some mistake about this fellow Sirdar Fath. He could produce a hundred villagers who have known the fellow from his boyhood."

The chief faced Maxwell, smiling still, and their eyes countered.

"Very possible, General," Maxwell returned calmly. "I could produce a hundred villagers myself who would swear that black was white."

Mir Khan flushed darkly, and his hand went to his tulwar.

"You would deny my *izzat*—my honour?" he demanded quickly. The two words *izzat* and *sharm*, which comprehended a great deal more than mere "honour" and "shame," are ever upon the lips of the hillman, and comprise his entire code of ethics.

"I said nothing of *izzat*," and Maxwell flashed a smile at the other. "But, Mir Khan, I have heard strange stories of doings within the walls of Khotal Digar—stories of new fortifications, of new defences and new guns, and also stories of the Tulwar's Hilt. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I do not think the hills are very safe, you see."

"You have heard lies, Maxwell sahib!" The Alfridi had regained his calm poise, but his deep eyes flashed fire. "By the beard of the Prophet, my enemies have maligned me."

"So I trust," returned Maxwell quietly. "But Allah reveals all secrets in time."

"Come, we have every confidence in you, Mir Khan," interposed the General, who had watched the duel of words with anxious eyes. "Major Maxwell still suspects Sirdar Fath, but bygones are bygones. I will accept your invitation one of these days, Mir Khan, and will ride out to visit you with my staff. It is long since we have seen Khotal Digar."

"You will find it as you last saw it, General sahib. There are no new defences, no new guns. I swear it on the Koran!"

Now this is an oath that may not be lightly made, and Maxwell's eyes narrowed. He guessed

at once that Mir Khan spoke truly. He had been trying to ascertain that very thing by provoking the hillman, for if the defences were not at Khotal Digar, then the preparations for revolt embraced the Tulwar's Hilt alone.

Suddenly Mir Khan turned to him, his fine face innocent of guile, and eagerness in his eyes.

"Listen, Maxwell sahib! I will prove to you that this talk is made by my enemies. Did it not come from the men of Mahmud Singh?"

Maxwell hesitated. "Yes, it was one of his men told me. Why?"

"Because, on the morning I left Khotal Digar to come hither my barber was shaving me. As he shaved the fool told me that Mahmud Singh had offered him great wealth if he would slit my throat some morning. I waited until he had finished his tale, then I shot him and finished the shaving myself, for he was a fool. Some day I will ride over to the villages of Mahmud Singh and sprinkle the graves of his fathers with the blood of swine—the dog!"

Marjorie drew a little farther back, her face pale, for the earnestness of the man was beyond question. Without hesitation, however, Mir Khan hastened on.

"Come with me, Maxwell sahib! I will open every door in Khotal Digar unto you, and will prove that these sayings are lies. You shall inspect freely and openly, and there I will deliver up to you the men who slew the two sentries. I charged Sirdar Fath to find them, and that is doubtless the errand on which he rode to the hills so hastily. If you will do this thing I will

send you out with my own shikars, and you will bring in as many markhor as you wish."

Maxwell did not betray the surprise that startled him at this unexpected offer. The gaze of the hillman never wavered beneath his keen scrutiny, but the trap was too plausible, too openly offered, and his suspicions leaped into flame.

"I fear that is impossible," he smiled slightly. "I am going in the other direction, up beyond Chotal. Perhaps General Danton would accept it on behalf of one of his aides, who might go with a sufficient escort——"

"Ah, you are afraid!" The unconcealed contempt in Mir Khan's face and voice stung deep. "You fear to trust yourself to me, Major sahib?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Maxwell angrily. "I tell you to your face that I suspect and distrust any offers you may make, Mir Khan! There you have it flat."

His quick suspicions were increased when, instead of flying into a rage at the accusation, Mir Khan only turned with a smile and a deprecatory wave of the hand.

"Alas, General sahib! Is my faith of so small account among your sirdars? Yet is Maxwell sahib accounted a brave man, and I had hoped he would accept the invitation and so disprove these rumours. Can I offer more?"

A swift idea leaped into Maxwell's mind. In a flash he comprehended its almost hopeless dangers to himself, but he was not thinking of himself at that instant. It was a move in the game, and the game was too great to care for the life of a pawn.

"Wait, Mir Khan!" he cried. "I will accept your offer, but on one condition only. I have told you frankly that I distrust you, therefore leave a hostage here for my safety."

The hillman beamed. "Be it so, Major sahib! I will send my cousin——"

"Nay, this is no talk of cousins. Send in Sirdar Fath as hostage, and him only. Then will I come to visit you without fear."

For just an instant Mir Khan was taken aback.

"But, sahib, the man is even now in the hills——"

"It matters not. Let it be in this fashion. To-morrow at noon I will ride out to the pass with an escort. Let the sirdar come to meet me with an escort. My escort will lead him back, his shall lead me, and each will be a hostage for the other. Is it good?"

Mir Khan gazed at him, evidently shrewdly running over every possibility in his mind. Marjorie had quietly disappeared.

"It is good," nodded the chief finally. "It shall be done."

With a dignified bow to the General, Mir Khan strode down the steps, took his rifle from the guard, leaped into the saddle of the horse that a sais led up, and rode away. Maxwell looked after the splendid figure admiringly.

"Sit down, my boy," and General Danton pressed him into a chair and regarded him with a worried look. "What on earth induced you to accept that invitation?"

"Several things," laughed Maxwell easily; but there was a strained note in his voice that did not

escape the older man. "First, you cannot match cunning against cunning with these hillmen, General. The only thing they cannot understand is simplicity. You know how important it is that we get our hands on the trouble-breeder."

The other nodded.

"But he's not worth your life, Maxwell. Better give this thing up."

"Look here, General," returned Maxwell earnestly. "Mir Khan would have sacrificed any one else without a thought to get me safe. He dare not sacrifice Serge Petrovski. He will never dream that I would give myself up to him on the certainty of death; he would look beyond that, seeking for some cunning stratagem. He believes firmly that Sirdar Fath will be safe in your hands, just as safe as I will be in his."

"Eh!" exclaimed the General quickly. "Why the devil won't he?"

"He made the proposition in the first place," went on Maxwell quietly, "thinking that he could shoot me offhand and let the hostage go hang. He dare not do this with Sirdar Fath, so he accepted his defeat like a man. As soon as you get your hands on this Russian, General, have him examined in secret. I can swear positively that he is Serge Petrovski; all you have to do is wash off his paint, and if you find that he has a white skin, shoot him on the instant."

"But, my boy!" His ruddy face suddenly pale, General Danton held out his hand. "I cannot do that! I cannot leave you in the hands of Mir Khan——"

"If you refuse, General," rejoined Maxwell

firmly, "I will place the whole matter in the hands of Sir Forbes Campbell. My life matters little, and the trouble-breeder is a menace to the whole frontier. It is for the raj, General, and for the flag, and for the oaths that we have sworn in our souls. Now, you will do it?"

The old General dropped his head into his hands.

"God help me!" he murmured brokenly. "You are more than a son to me, Raymond. God help me! Yes—I will do my duty. If the man's skin is white he dies."

And the two silently gripped hands.

CHAPTER IX

FAREWELL TO PESHAWUR

IT still lacked half an hour of noon when Maxwell, clad in khaki service uniform, mounted and rode out to the regimental parade-ground. Here he found Reeves, of his regiment, and a troop of the Lancers, while Bobby Manners, who had been detailed to take charge of Sirdar Fath, trotted over to meet him.

He returned Manners's salute stiffly, his grave eyes wandering over the stalwart figures of the Lancers, who were standing at attention. He was taking a tremendous risk, and if these men failed him he would be alone among the enemy, with his great object still unaccomplished.

But if Serge Petrovski was put out of the way he would be content with his fate. Other trouble-breeders would come in the course of time, but there would be other watchers of the hills to meet them.

"All ready?" He returned the salute of Reeves.

"Ready, sir."

"Advance in fours from the right—walk—march!"

Headed by Maxwell, with Reeves and Manners on either side of him, the troop left the parade-

ground and swung into the dust-grey road which led to the pass. As they cleared the cantonments Maxwell gave a curt command to canter, for they had started a trifle late, and Mir Khan would be punctual.

Maxwell wondered if Manners realized the gravity of his mission. From time to time the subaltern glanced at the stern face beside him, but it was Maxwell who broke silence.

"This is a deuced ticklish affair, Manners. More depends on the safe arrival of Sirdar Fath in Peshawur than you dream of. He's a tricky customer, mark that!"

"All right, old chap!" returned Manners confidently. "Bet you a thousand sovs. to a pinch of snuff he won't get away from yours truly."

"I think I'll take that bet," and Maxwell's eyes twinkled. "Just put it down in that little book of yours, will you?"

Somewhat taken aback, Manners stared at him, then pulled the book from his breast-pocket, and with a sniff of disgust wrote down the bet. But the older man's face sobered.

"Look here, Manners, you know that Sirdar Fath is the trouble-breeder, and the hostage for my safety. As it stands I have a mighty slim chance of getting back to Peshawur with a whole skin—if at all. If he gets away from you, that chance is gone. If you can't get him into the General's hands alive, then get him there dead."

"You can depend upon me, sir," replied Manners simply but earnestly, his boyish face settling for a moment into older and harsher lines. "He shall go straight to the General, and I believe

that Sir Forbes is at the bungalow now, waiting for him."

Maxwell nodded, and they rode on in silence, only the clink of bits and the rattle of sabres on saddles sounding in the dull noonday heat. Half-way up the narrow zigzag of the pass road a slight movement caught Maxwell's eye.

"Halt!"

Hand on revolver, he sat his horse, watching, while the eyes of the others shifted between his immobile figure and the hillside. They were old in the game of the hills, these men.

Then from behind the rocks emerged two lithe figures in khaki and sandals, and a ripple of relief went through the horsemen. They were but two of the Khyber Rifles, the Afridis who guard the pass for the Government in caravan-time.

At Maxwell's curt order to advance the troop silently followed him forward. But now their hands rested on the carbine-butts, though on some of the lower summits might be made out one or two more khaki-clad figures. To Ghurka eyes all hillsmen look alike, and the feud' cherished between hills and plains reckes little of uniform.

Above them appeared a short cut between two of the serpentines on the road. Just beyond this was the appointed meeting-place, where the pass gradually widened. Scattered all about were the dried bones of erstwhile villages.

Here and there on the hilltops were jagged stumps of towers and rents where walls had stood. Glinting afar in the distance might be seen the snow-white walls of an Afridi fort, held, not against but for the sirkar.

As they turned the last corner they caught another glimpse of two khaki figures and the sheen of sun on steel. These were the last of the lonely Rifles, who twice a week watched from Peshawur to the crests for the Kabul caravan. Then the road opened out, and they knew they had not come in vain.

Mir Khan and Sirdar Fath were sitting with half a dozen other horsemen, while behind them stood a score of men on foot—Afghans, Afridis, and Pathans ; these were the pick of hill-fighters, and looked it.

All, save Mir Khan, who ever wore his simple dress, were gay with bright lungis, which were used as kummerbunds and pagaris, or turbans. The glaring sunlight brought out every colour of the shawls, and in grim contrast were the ancient muskets and cartridge pockets of their wearers. Maxwell halted his escort a hundred feet distant.

"Manners, you will accompany me. Reeves, you will remain with the escort. At the slightest sign of treachery open fire. Shoot to kill."

Reeves saluted and fell back beside his men, who had drawn their carbines from the buckets and were holding them at the carry. Accompanied by Manners, Maxwell rode forward, as did Mir Khan and Sirdar Fath. The four men met half-way between the parties.

The hill chief gravely salaamed to Maxwell, who nodded his head in return, eyeing Sirdar Fath sternly. The latter grinned easily.

"On time, Maxwell sahib !"

"Very good. Mir Khan, I am ready to accompany you."

"The Major sahib will find that he has misjudged me sadly," laughed Sirdar Fath, his white teeth flashing out, and speaking in Pushtu. "I am the friend of the sirkar, hazur, and mean no harm."

Maxwell shrugged his shoulders and waved the man to Manners, who closed up at once. "What you say may be true, sirdar. Now, Manners, you will see that the sirdar is delivered to the General. Treat him, of course, with every courtesy. Good-bye, and good luck!"

He gripped the outstretched hand of Manners, and the two men looked into each other's eyes for a moment.

"Is there any—message, Major?"

"No, Bobby," returned Maxwell quietly. "If I shouldn't come back you might say that I wanted to be remembered to—her."

Without awaiting the answering nod, he whirled his pony about and joined Mir Khan. Sirdar Fath, still smiling, salaamed and awaited Manners's order.

"All ready, Khan," announced Maxwell briefly. His fingers rested lightly on the butt of his revolver. "If harm come to me you may lose more than izzat."

"My honour is in the hands of the compassionate," bowed the stately chief, the smooth words falling easily from his lips. "Am I not the friend of the sirkar?"

Together they wheeled their ponies, and the hillsmen closed about them. From behind Maxwell caught the curt orders that Reeves rapped out to the departing Lancers, but he did not look around.

Before him lay the hills ; before him was Khotal Digar, hidden somewhere in that mass of wind-swept anarchy of rock, and what lay behind was now no affair of his.

Had Maxwell turned he might have noted that the escort of hillsmen had suddenly shrunk by a full half. But his face was set toward the blue peaks, and his mind was busy with the problem that lay before him—the problem of handling these children of the hills with a firm grip, yet without provoking them to hasty wrath.

Across the folds and rifts of ground ahead they could see the native villages in the valleys, green with young corn just covering the dust-hued earth.

In the far distance flashed a glimpse of the first Afghan border town, Dakha ; while farther still could be discerned the hazy shimmer of Jellalabad. Above them was bare precipice, and below lay the greening valleys, transfigured under the midday sun.

No longer might the Khyber Rifles be seen rising miraculously from the rock-piles above the road. Here there was naught but barren country, save where in the valleys lay the village walls and square, tapering, forty-foot towers of the Utkels.

They were enfolded in the magic of the hills, and the power of the sarkar was very far away ; yet there rested a light of quiet exultation on the face of the lean, khaki-clad, level-eyed man who rode at the side of the master of the hills.

For Mir Khan was master here. Once he had been a simple shepherd, with a blood-feud and a price upon his head. The blood-feud he had settled in hill fashion, and his enemies had

prudently forgotten that there was a price upon him.

His Afghan cunning, his relentless will, his reckless bravery, all combined to make him the perfect type of border hero, so it was not strange that at his call the hill tribes might rise by the thousand.

But more to be feared than the hill tribes were the single thousand in the Tulwar's Hilt—outlaws to a man, outlawed by the sarkar and the Amir alike—men who were wolves in ferocity and who idolized Mir Khan as the leader who was to open to them the locked gates of the British raj.

On they rode, slipping and stumbling—now in some far-flung, rocky defile, now among the boulders of some dried torrent-bed, where the mountain winds whistled eerily.

Once, far below them, appeared a kafila of camels, stalking in ungainly fashion toward the protection of the hidden Rifles. More than one hand went to knife-haft, more than one keen gaze sent a scowl at the officer, and Maxwell laughed grimly.

"It is hard for wolves to look upon the sheep and not unsheath their claws, Mir Khan. Well, have you found any of those who slew my sentries?"

"*Bismillah!* Allah unfolded all in his own good time, brother," replied the chief sententiously. Maxwell's eyes narrowed at the familiarity, but he said nothing. Mir Khan was obviously trying to treat him as an honoured guest, and meant no offence, as his next words showed. "Orders have been given in the matter, and to-morrow the men shall be brought to Khotal Digar. As you sus-

pected, they were men from one of my villages—two in number, and had boasted widely of their exploit. Yourself shall judge them, and as you order done, so it shall be, even unto their deaths. I swear it upon my izzat.”

“That is well said,” returned Maxwell. This remarkable acquiescence was disquieting, as was the speed with which the matter was being pushed through. He guessed that Mir Khan would provide a pair of petty criminals, whose deaths would be a slight matter, and resolved that the investigation would be no superficial one.

That the real criminals would be given up was out of the question. He was playing the game of craft against craft, was Mir Khan. The only thing that could defeat him was such absolute simplicity, as he could not understand, for Mir was a thorough Afghan in the intricate workings of his mind.

Hour after hour they pushed on, and, as they rode, Mir Khan fell to talking of his own life and deeds. For the moment the innate ferocity of the man gave way to a veneer of pride; his words were no mere boasting, but were designed to show this Feringee guest that his was a strength unassailable. He spoke of his early days, of lonely rides across the wind-ridden hills, of the foes who had been snared one by one as they watched or feasted or slept. But through all his talk there came no word of the Tulwar's Hilt, and Maxwell smiled to himself as he listened.

What was the meaning of this invitation? Was there anything more behind it than a desire to blind the eyes of the sirkar to the hidden fortalice in the north? Sirdar Fath knew that he had been

recognized, and would never thrust his head into the lion's mouth unless there was some deep object behind it all—some loophole of escape.

"Well," thought Maxwell to himself, "men have played the game and paid the price before this. If I have made a mistake another will come to take my place, for the game must go on."

Maxwell had thought that he knew the hill paths fairly well, but Mir Khan cut swiftly toward the north by ways he had never dreamed of; and just as the sun was tipping the western peaks the chieftain pointed ahead.

"There is Khotal Digar, sahib."

The old town upon which Mir Khan had seized years before and established himself securely had formerly been a fortress of might. Around it stretched the mountains, with never a level yard for miles—nothing but a welter of naked hills, shale scree giving on to precipice, ridge entangling ridge.

There was no end, no direction—nothing but exposure. From the white steeps of the Hindu-Kush in the sky to the black-dotted wild olive-bushes there was nothing but hard, sterile impossibility. And in the midst lay Khotal Digar.

The town itself was small, and above it hung the half-ruined fortalice of square walls and a single minaret-like tower.

But despite its strong position, it lay too near the raj for security, and somewhere amid the heights behind it lay the Tulwar's Hilt, the real stronghold for which this, of Khotal Digar, was but a screen to Feringee eyes. It was here that Mir Khan kept his wives, but in the other lay his

treasure—for gold is as the apple of an Afghan's eye.

"Welcome to my house, *hazur* [lord], and regard it as thine own," said Mir Khan as they rode through the gates. A score of hillsmen greeted them, but Maxwell's eyes took in the old muskets with a glint of suspicion. Mir Khan had rifles—when he chose to show them.

"Presently we will go out after mountain goats, Maxwell sahib, and then you will have such shooting as you seldom find elsewhere."

"Your hospitality is welcome, and for that may Allah bless you!" returned Maxwell quietly. "But before sport comes duty, Mir Khan. To-morrow we sit in judgment—you and I."

"If it be the will of Allah, to-morrow it shall be as you say. We are simple folk here, *hazur*, and I can but place at your disposal my own dwelling. If my servants do not obey you as myself they shall be crucified."

Two saices ran forward to lead off their horses, and Maxwell turned to the dwelling which was to be his for the time being. The interior of the fort was lined with mud huts, one of which had been assigned to him. Across the courtyard was a low dais, before a door which evidently opened into the simple "palace" of the hill chieftain.

Here were the quarters of the women, and behind the latticed windows Maxwell's eyes caught a flutter of draperies that bespoke curious onlookers of the scene below.

He did not doubt that Mir Khan's own dwelling had been given him, for it was well known that

the famous chief lived among his men as one of them, retaining the rugged simplicity of his early days. This, indeed, was one of the secrets of his power.

At the steps of the hut, which had been built in crude imitation of the bungalows at Peshawur, Maxwell turned and courteously saluted Mir Khan, who placed servants at his disposal. He then entered his dwelling, dismissed the servants with a curt request for water, and was alone.

"Well, the game is on," he muttered grimly. "By this time, I suppose, Serge Petrovski has done with breeding trouble in the hills. I suppose the news will come up by to-morrow, and then it'll be up to me to bluff Mir Khan to a finish, or else Reeves will get his captaincy."

With which philosophical conclusion he flung his Sam Browne belt on the low couch and proceeded to examine his dwelling. It contained but one room and a small, high window, while the door was of solid structure, strengthened with iron.

A place that might prove to be a capital prison. After lifting the reed matting and making a careful inspection of wall and floor, Maxwell loosened his tunic and flung himself down on the couch, satisfied that he was safe from prying eyes.

Silently and swiftly one of the native servants flitted in and laid on the table an earthen cup of cool water, after which he salaamed and withdrew. The act of washing, save for the ablutions prescribed by the Prophet, being beyond the understanding of a hillsman, Maxwell chuckled and cleansed himself as best he could, afterward retiring to rest.

The ride had been a hard one, and when he awoke he found that darkness had already fallen. A small native lamp had been lighted and left on the table, and by its dull rays he glanced at his wrist-watch. Seven o'clock. As he rose a servant glided in with a salaam.

"If it is to your pleasure, sahib, to break bread with our lord?"

Maxwell nodded and strode after the native, who led him across the courtyard to another of the plain, unadorned buildings. Here he found Mir Khan, and was greeted with grave courtesy.

The repast was a simple one—curry, chupattis, and curds, with the two men eating from a single dish. Yet there was one significant fact, which might have been imagination, but which Maxwell silently accepted—there was no flavour of salt to the food, even to the curry, which might or might not mean anything.

The meal was followed by a light dessert of faloda, a jelly of wheat, sherbet, and snow. Following this a servant brought in a tremendous and very beautiful chilam, or hookah, and for an hour the two men conversed in generalities, both host and guest carefully avoiding the topic which lay nearest their minds.

Now Mir Khan was the affable, polished gentleman of the hills, urbane to his very finger-tips, and it was with real regret that Maxwell rose from his cushions toward midnight and took his leave.

Stepping across the courtyard with his servant, he saw the moon just breaking from a smother of clouds overhead, and paused for a moment at the doorway of his hut.

As he did so there came a little murmur of voices from the gateway, and a chorus of surprised "*Wahillahs!*" carried faintly to him. An instant later a man flitted across to the hut of Mir Khan.

At the very doorway he turned for an instant, then vanished. But that instant was enough to send Maxwell into his own hut with startled incredulity in his heart.

"Great Scott!" he murmured, sinking down on his charpoy and staring blankly at the lamp. "Unless I am mad, that man was the trouble-breeder!"

CHAPTER X

A WATCHER IN THE TOILS

"GIVE me to eat pig! Is it not written that if a holy man eat half his loaf he giveth the other half to a beggar?"

"*Ma'uzbillah!* Go, seek thine own rations, Shere Ali! It is further written that if a king conquers all the world he will seek another to conquer also. Go, waken this Feringee dog."

"Waken him thyself, son of a corpse-eater! I am not his slave. *Wah!* May we see him crucified! Yet he is a man among men, this Feringee."

"Aye, and the shadow of God liketh it ill! Twelve dervishes may sleep under one blanket, but two kings cannot live in a city. By another sunset——"

The two voices ceased suddenly. An instant later they sounded in a low drone that rose with the first beam of the sun from all parts of Khotal Digar, in the stately sentences that open Al Koran—

" ' Praised be God, Lord of all the worlds, the compassionate, the merciful ! ' "

Maxwell rolled over with a grunt and rose from his charpoy, the brief dialogue still sounding in his ears. Fresh water had been placed for him,

together with a small bowl of pilau meat and rice together, to serve as breakfast.

"I may have been mistaken last night," he thought hopefully. "If I was not, then I'll know before long. Two kings cannot live in a city, eh? Now, I wonder what is to take place by another sunset? Well, I'll have to find Shuja'at Din and send down word to Madho Rao. Perhaps I'd better have him wait and see what happens to-day."

Ten minutes later he flung open the door and stepped out into the courtyard. The long, low guard-house beside the gates seemed emptied, and save for two or three sentries on the half-ruined walls there were not a dozen hillsmen in sight.

Maxwell walked over to the well in the centre of the courtyard and ordered one of the scowling Afridis to draw him water.

The order was obeyed, and, after a long drink, Maxwell turned to his quest. He must find the beggar, Shuja'at Din, at once and put him on his guard. No doubt the man had seen his arrival the evening before.

Somewhat to his surprise, he was permitted to wander about the place at his will. Filling his pipe, the only luxury at his disposal, he aimlessly wandered to the gates with eyes that watched keenly and ears attuned to catch the slightest sound.

There were two men whom he was extremely anxious to see—the one who had crossed the courtyard the night before and Shuja'at Din.

But, look as he would, he could see neither. Finally, concluding that the beggar must be in the town below and around the fort, he climbed

the steps behind the guard-house and reached the ramparts, where he stood looking over the valleys.

Somewhere to the north lay the Tulwar's Hilt, and he alone of all Englishmen—he and Madho Rao alone of all the raj—knew the way thither. Suddenly a hand touched his arm, and he whirled to look into the smiling countenance of Mir Khan.

“Salaam, sahib! You have arisen early.”

“Good morning, Mir Khan,” and a slight smile curved Maxwell's lips. “Did you sleep well after I left you?”

“Allah was pleased to bless my slumbers,” returned the other piously, with a single keen glance into the level grey eyes, a shade lighter than his own. Many an Afghan is fair, and Mir Khan perhaps had a mother from Kabul, City of Orchards, for his dark grey eyes contrasted oddly with his swarthy lashes.

“I rejoice to say that I have good news for you, brother,” went on the hillsman imperturbably, looking out over the far valley, where the morning mists still writhed. “After you had left me last night came one with word that the murderers have been taken. Say, shall they be slain or would you judge them with me?”

“Let there be judgment done, Mir Khan! It may be a lesson to others of your people who are inclined to follow the same course.”

Mir Khan nodded, a slight twinkle of amusement lighting his face. But it was gone instantly.

“You have slept well? You have been served well?”

“I have no complaint, thanks. I am not unused to the hills.”

"So I have heard," came the dry retort. "I am honoured, hazur, to have you as my guest, for it is not often that a Feringee visits Khotal Digar."

"They might receive a warm welcome if they came uninvited, eh?" laughed Maxwell.

The other paid no attention, but pointed over the valley.

"See, men fought out there long years ago, before you or I saw the light—not as they fight to-day, but with armies—and the raj triumphed. Now there is no more great fighting, but peace and plenty are in the land, and if a man wishes to slay his enemy the raj knows nothing of it. That is as it should be, sahib."

"Yet, Mir Khan, there are men who would have the old times return—who would once more begin the war of Sunni against Shiah——"

"May Allah blight the dogs!" and Mir Khan spat viciously. "May Imam-al-Mahdi rest in Jehannum! Were it not for the raj my men would sweep over the Hazara hills until they were as empty of prayers to Ali as a month-old corpse!"

"Who—these men of yours?"

The quiet words, the curt sweep of Maxwell's hand toward the half-dozen sheepskin-clad ruffians in the courtyard, seemed to still Mir Khan's virtuous Sunni rage. Instantly the crafty nature was uppermost again.

"Aye, even these. Will not the dog fight when the graves of his fathers are defiled? But there is work to be done and a dispute among some of my people to be settled. Go where you please, sahib, and see unhindered that here are no Russian guns. After *chota-hazri* we will hold judgment."

Maxwell nodded and watched the stalwart, athletic figure of the chief stride off. By this time there were more men in the courtyard, a few women of the town, merchants chaffering with the tribesmen, and one or two beggars displaying their stock-in-trade of sores and maimed limbs.

Regaining the courtyard, Maxwell stopped before one of these and threw a copper coin into the twisted hand. The man was blind also, but clutched at the coin and sniffed.

"Feringee ! May Allah curse thee to the uttermost !" The tone was of gratitude, and as Maxwell caught the words, which the beggar thought beyond his comprehension, he smiled at the grinning men around.

"May Allah grant the Sikh's Blood to our lord ; may He sweep thee and thine from the hills ; may thy wives be childless and thy children die in birth !"

"And how knew you I was a Feringee ?" Maxwell asked quietly in the Pushtu used by the beggar. The latter started, trembled, stared with his sightless eyes, and then bowed his head upon his breast.

"*Wah-illah !* God is great, and has cursed me in my feebleness. My nose has failed me, for this man smells as a Feringee and speaks as *al el kitab*, the people of the book !"

"He is a bold man of his nose, eh ?" laughed Maxwell, and strolled on, seeking the lost Shuja'at Din in vain.

But the words of the beggar remained with him. So they waited only for the Sikh's Blood, these men of the hills, whom superstition ruled far more than strength.

His thoughts flew back to Marjorie Danton and the gift of Mir Khan. The full story of the stone was known to few, but the legend that its owner should rule the hills was widespread.

Maxwell himself did not know the tale, but the legend was firmly believed in by every hillsman, Sunni or Shiah, from Chitral to Herat.

For a little Maxwell stood by the heavy wooden gates, giving up the search for his messenger, and watched the throng inside the courtyard. Suddenly as he knocked out his pipe a thin, quavering voice reached him.

"Alms, heaven-born ! Alms, for the love of Allah the compassionate !"

Maxwell turned carelessly. With outstretched hand there crouched before him the man he sought, Shuja'at Din, he of the dragging foot and open sores, who had served the raj through every foot of the hill country and beyond. The two stood alone for the moment, and Maxwell lost no time.

"Thy word? Hasten !"

"Bad, protector ! I am watched ; the evil eye is upon me, and I have seen the face of the trouble-breeder this day."

"What ! Are you sure? "

"Am I sure that Al Kafi is a holy book? The villages are astir, hazur, and it is said that the Khan holds the Sikh's Blood."

"A lie. I myself have it in safety. Spread the word that the stone is in the hands of the sirkar. Now, if thy tale be true, I am a dead man this day. Watch here, and bear word of what comes to Madho Rao at Peshawur. Jani the smith is dead."

Maxwell turned away, the lines deepening about his mouth. Shuja'at Din was no man to be deceived as regarded Serge Petrovski. It was the hand of the trouble-breeder that had given the beggar his hamstrung foot, in days long past, and the Afridi had all but earned the ten lacs from Simla in revenge.

So, then, he had not been mistaken last night ! It was characteristic of the man that he thought, not of his own danger but of his failure to serve Simla, to win the game on which he had staked more than life. He had failed, and was like to pay dear for it, but it was doubly bitter to know that Serge Petrovski was still in shape to continue his work for the bear.

"One of two things must have happened," mused Maxwell as he returned to his hut. "Either he broke away from Manners before reaching the city or else he threw dust in the General's eyes. But in that case he would have been retained as hostage. It looks as if the blame lay with Bobby. Poor chap, he'll be all broken up if I don't get back !"

He closed the door and lay down upon his charpoy, his tortured mind revolving every phase of the situation. Shuja'at was watched—and for this man, the most cunning of all his helpers, to fall under suspicion was a startling novelty. If any had detected him, it must have been the keen eye of the trouble-breeder.

Hour after hour he lay there thinking, but no way of escape could he find. Mir Khan, punctilious of his izzat in the least particular, had not eaten salt with him. To escape unaided was out of

the question. But was the wily hill chief about to break openly with the sirkar?

"By heavens, it looks bad all the way around!" he muttered as the servants entered with the *chota-hazri*, or light breakfast meal. "Things are approaching a crisis right enough, and if the trouble-breeder has escaped the snare he will be only too anxious to wipe me out and take the chance. Well—*kismet*!"

He had barely finished the meal when one of the servants entered softly.

"Hazur, our lord sends his salaams. He desires to know if it be your will to sit with him upon the seat of judgment now or later."

"My salaams to Mir Khan," replied Maxwell quietly. "I will be with him in a moment."

Calmly Maxwell buckled on his sword-belt and revolver, picking it up from the couch where it had lain that morning, and stepped to the door. The courtyard was thronged now, and Mir Khan, disdaining the shelter of an awning, was standing on the dais before the door of the old palace.

Here had been placed two seats, and as the throng opened before Maxwell's approach Mir Khan turned in greeting, the officer stiffly returning his salute.

"Greetings, Major sahib! Thy prisoners are coming, and first I have a case to judge, if it please thee to listen."

Maxwell nodded and took the seat on the right of Mir Khan. There was no preliminary, but an Afghan horse-trader, burly and swaggering, stepped forward and recited his case against one of the garrison.

There was a wealth of profuse language, plentifully sprinkled with pious curses, and when he had finished Mir Khan motioned the Afridi forward.

So involved was the matter that even Maxwell could make little of it. Witness after witness was called, swore volubly, and departed; but finally Mir Khan waved his hand impatiently.

"I have heard enough. Ye are liars, all of you. Afghan, did you doubt my justice that you hired men to swear in your behalf?"

"Nay," stammered the swaggerer, taken aback. "It—it is the custom, hazur!"

"It is not my custom," bluntly rejoined the chief. "Sirdar Ali! Lead those false swearers outside the walls and beat them. As for you, Afghan, you are in the right. If your money is not paid over within an hour, come to me, and it may be that my hand shall collect it with interest."

This decision, though against their own comrade, met with wild shouts of approval from the hillsmen, and Mir Khan turned to his guest with a smile.

"God is great, sahib!"

"And His shadow deals out true justice, Mir Khan," nodded Maxwell, to the intense satisfaction of the other. "Remember that this case of the two murderers is mine, however."

As he spoke the crowd opened again, and two men were dragged through and flung down before the dais. The next instant Maxwell knew that his face had gone white beneath its bronze. One of the men was a vacuous-eyed villager, the other was Shuja'at Din, the beggar!

During one brief moment there was a tense silence, for not a man there but knew what was forward. Mir Khan's eyes played on Maxwell's face for a moment, then he smiled with cruel irony.

"These be the men, hazur. They have confessed to the crime."

Maxwell swore beneath his breath, but repaid smile with smile. The eyes of Shuja'at met his without recognition, and he beckoned forward the villager first.

"What have you to say? Did you stab a Feringee sentry and steal his rifle or no?"

The man looked from one to the other. It was plain that he had been frightened out of what few wits he possessed and knew not what he ought to say. Finally he bent his head until it rested on his hands at the edge of the dais, and began to wail forth a long narrative which was utterly incomprehensible.

"Stand up, dog!" snapped out Mir Khan with vicious emphasis. "Speak the truth to the sahib, else I will cut thy tongue from thy throat!"

Two guards roughly dragged the man to his feet. He turned eyes of mute appeal on Maxwell and answered—

"I did not do this thing, O presence!"

"Lying son of a pig!" roared the hill chief, shaking his fist. "I say that you have confessed——"

"Silence, Mir Khan!" Maxwell interrupted sternly, for he was thoroughly aroused by the cunning of the other. Too late he was beginning to see the trap, but he grimly resolved there should

be no weakening. "I am trying this case, and I will do it in my own way." He turned to the trembling villager. "Speak the real truth, friend. Did you slay or not?"

"O heaven-born, I did not! I swear it by Allah, by my izzat, by my fathers, and my first-born! I was brought here by our lord's orders, and am innocent!"

Maxwell turned to Mir Khan, and now his eyes were like cold flame. The hill chief drew back as if he had been struck beneath that look.

"Why do you bring in men who are innocent, Mir Khan? Am I a dog that you should seek to play with me thus? Be careful, O shadow of Allah! It is written that he who would beard the Amir must first beard the Amir's slave, and truly you have dared to beard me! Be careful!"

Without awaiting an answer he turned to the guards and called the sirdar in charge.

"Sirdar Ali! Take this man forth and set him free beyond the gates. *Hukum hai*—it is an order! Go!"

The bearded hillsman, a Pathan, stared sullenly for an instant, then growled out an order. The frightened villager was dragged away, and Maxwell watched him taken to the gates and set loose. Then Mir Khan rose, a flame in his eyes.

"Major sahib, you are my guest, and I may not exact payment for these words. I have said that these men confessed their fault. Question now this other, and if I have not spoken truly may I be a man without izzat and utterly dishonoured!"

"Do lame men, then, slay soldiers of the raj

by night?" Maxwell smiled contemptuously as he pointed to Shuja'at Din, then turned to the beggar.

"You have heard. Speak!"

To the utter stupefaction of Maxwell, Shuja'at bowed his head upon his hands and groaned out an assent.

"Sahib, our lord has spoken of his wisdom. It was I alone who stole upon your sentries and slew them. Afterward I sold their rifles to a man from Ghazni, whose name I know not."

Mir Khan smiled his satisfaction, and a murmur of gratification swelled up from the throng. But Maxwell stood astounded. The utter barefaced lie was beyond his comprehension for a moment, then as the eyes of the beggar met his he understood.

If judgment were left to him, Shuja'at would be awarded a speedy end; if Petrovski or Mir Khan alone took charge—well, there had been flayings at Khotal Digar before this.

But before Maxwell could speak there came an interruption. A single yell shrilled up from the gate and the crowd swung about in tumult as through their midst was dragged a man, surrounded by hillsmen.

With shouts and cries of rage the prisoner was urged forward, and as he was flung into the open space before the dais and staggered to his feet Maxwell looked into the defiant face of Madho Rao!

"Slay him!" shouted Sirdar Ali. "The uniform of the sirkar—slay him, lord!"

CHAPTER XI

MADHO RAO, MURDERER

INSTANTLY the wide courtyard was in wild uproar. With sudden yells the Afridis broke their crowded ranks and surged around, kukris and tulwars flashing in the sunlight.

Panting, dishevelled, eyes staring wildly, and face covered with dust and blood, Madho Rao was led forward until he faced the dais. Maxwell half rose to his feet, then sank back in disbelief of his own senses at the sight. What had happened?

"What does this dog, who licks the heels of the sirkar, in Khotal Digar?," demanded Mir Khan, assuming command of the situation.

For answer one of the guards salaamed, then flung down with a clatter a Lee-Enfield rifle and cartridge-pouch.

"O sirdar of the hills, we have brought this dog to thee from the place of watching above the pass. He came to us staggering, running wildly, with the tale of killing a man, and wishing to join us. Say, shall we crucify the dog or merely hang him?"

Mir Khan impatiently waved his eager men away, flashing a glance around that sent the Afridis back in a snarling circle.

“ Back, sons of Sheitan ! Back, dogs ! Would ye be masters here ? ” His face convulsed with anger, he turned on the Ghurka. “ Speak, thou lickster of the dust ! Do Ghurkas kill men in these days ? Is there yet manhood in this people of thine that bows its neck to the raj ? ”

Watching with startled eyes, Maxwell felt his worst fears confirmed. That a Ghurka should take such words calmly boded ill indeed, for Ghurkas are proud even above the pride of Afridis.

A little flicker of emotion crossed the blood-stained face, but Madho Rao merely drew himself a trifle straighter, if possible ; then he bent forward in a low salaam, and his voice became husky and dust-choked.

“ O protector of the accursed ! Thy servant has bowed his neck to the raj for the last time. Is it permitted that thy servant tells his story ? ”

“ What else do I wait for, dog ? ” stormed the angry chieftain. “ Speak ! ”

“ Then know, protector, that I had a friend, the Havildar Kharber Pun. He was a Kafir without honour, though he had won the Order of Merit from the sahibs. Two days ago I heard the story that he had found a woman whom I had established in the town, and had visited her in secret, afterward laughing with my comrades over my stolen honour ! *Ai*, the misbegotten of Allah, may his bones lie among swine and his children be cursed, may he be brother-in-law unto all the regiment ! ”

As he spoke rage blazed forth in the blood-streaked face, and a little trickle of crimson broke out afresh from a slash across his brow.

The bitter intensity of his words struck conviction to all ; Maxwell leaned forward with white, grim face, for he had known the Havildar Kharber Pun for a true man and 'a worthy.

" I went to the woman, lord, and I found him with her. *Ai*, but it was an evil moment for the swine ! When I had done with him I slashed him across the eyes, then I beat the woman and fled, bringing my rifle. See, lord, when I stabbed him I tore this from his breast"—and the vehement Ghurka flung down something that tinkled on the stones—" and bring it in proof. Once he slashed me here, over the brow, then his dog soul fled from him. Now, protector, take me into thy band ! If not, then have thy men lead me out to be shot as a man, for my hand has been set against the raj. Here is my money and the money I took from mine enemy ; if thou wilt have me, keep it in trust ; if not, I have little need of it in paradise."

" Aye, truly thy hand has been set against the raj ! " muttered Mir Khan grimly, and a murmur of applause ran around the watching men. Maxwell's brow was damp with sweat as he gazed sternly at Madho Rao, who avoided his glance ; too well he knew his danger, for this Ghurka whom he had trusted was lost to the raj for ever—and knew the secrets of Maxwell sahib into the bargain. For one instant Maxwell's hand went to his revolver, then it dropped. He could not slay the man in cold blood.

Mir Khan leaned forward and picked up the object that had rattled down. Stepping forward to his side, Maxwell looked down at the fragment

of silver, its crimson ribbon half-slashed across and clotted over with blood. It was the Indian Order of Merit, and at sight of the almost sacred object the white man turned with a snarl of rage.

"You dirty renegade——" But as the first words left Maxwell's lips his rage passed, and he stepped back in sudden realization that the end of the game had come.

For there, pushing arrogantly through the crowd, was, not Sirdar Fath but Serge Petrovski, cruel eyes glinting, cruel nose scenting blood, cruel steel jaw set grimly. The mask was off, and Maxwell had met his enemy face to face !

For a bare instant Petrovski's glance rested on the Englishman above him ; then it went swiftly to the figure of Madho Rao.

"Who is this dog of a Ghurka who defiles the hills with the uniform of the raj? "

The words snapped out clear and distinct, the Afghans shrinking back before the Russian. Maxwell started, his eyes blazing, and his hand went to his holster.

Again he checked himself ; he was snared indeed ! Petrovski here openly—that had but one meaning. The man had escaped from Peshawur. But there was the game to play, and he kept tight rein on his flaming passions.

In few words Mir Khan related the story of the Ghurka. Petrovski listened without comment, his jet-black eyes boring into Madho Rao. On the tense, expectant silence the words of the chieftain rang loudly, a little murmur of corroboration humming up from dusky throats as he finished.

"Let me see the badge."

Petrovski took the order, looked at it, and nodded. Handing it back, he turned on Madho Rao like a flash.

"So! You would betray the salt you have eaten?"

The Ghurka spat on the ground, his sullen eyes flaring up.

"Betray? Has not the raj betrayed me? Allah curse the swine! Give me but my rifle and let me shoot down yonder dog of a Feringee, who dared to lash me in the bazaar at Bunnu! Aye, I am come to fight them, for have I not become *ghazi*?"

At the word a little mutter of applause rang out from all, and Maxwell clenched his hands. So Madho Rao had now become a *ghazi*, a fanatic who had sworn to kill a Christian at the first opportunity, a man crazed with religion!

The hawk-face of Petrovski turned and fastened on the four beggars who cowered against the farther wall. Then into his eyes came a quick gleam, and Maxwell wondered.

"Lead forth the man Shuja'at Din. I had thought to reserve him for the torture-room, but now we have a better fate for him."

As he comprehended the purpose of his enemy, Maxwell's control gave way. Whipping out his revolver, he took one step to the edge of the dais and covered Petrovski.

"Another word and you die, Serge Petrovski," he said quietly. To his utter amazement and dismay a quick smile flashed around the dark faces, while Petrovski turned to him, the cruel lips parted in flickering amusement and contempt.

"Words do not kill, Major Maxwell. Look in the chamber of your revolver."

So saying he calmly turned away. His face red with impotent rage, Maxwell looked at his weapon and dropped it with a groan, while a hoarse laugh rang out from somewhere in the crowd. The revolver was empty, and every cartridge had been stolen from his belt.

A shuffling of grass sandals broke the constrained silence that now settled down, as Shuja'at Din, palsied with fear, was dragged forward and flung down before the group.

His terror-stricken eyes wavered up to the face of Maxwell, who, pale and defiant, was waiting for the end, helpless. There was no hint of recognition in the writhing brown face of the beggar, however, and the Englishman's heart went out to him.

A word and the man could gain his life ; a word of betrayal, a word of the secrets that he knew, that Maxwell would presently be tortured for, and the beggar would go free. Again a flickering smile crossed the face of Petrovski.

"Madho Rao, this officer sahib is not to be feared ; he is as a tiger who has eaten of poison. Shoot this beggar for me ; so shall you be proven in my eyes."

The beggar 'was sweating in his fear, but no word came from his lips, and his face went down into the 'dust. Maxwell felt a thrill of admiration for the 'man. Would he himself die as well as this wretch who served him? For his would not be the easy death by bullet.

"I have no gun, sahib," answered the Ghurka

slowly. For response Petrovski drew a revolver from his belt.

"Take this. But turn it not on Maxwell sahib, lest you be flayed alive."

With a triumphant sneer Madho Rao examined his weapon, and looked up at the dais.

"Give command, sahib, and let me shoot the Kafir there!" he said hoarsely, pleading in his voice. "So shall I fulfil my vow——"

"Do as I bid, you dog!" and Petrovski spat out an oath. A flash of eagerness, or it might be rage, sprang into the Ghurka's face, and for an instant he hesitated. Then a thin smile wreathed his lips as he looked up.

"Another time, Maxwell sahib! Dost remember that whip in the bazaar? *Ai*, Madho Rao has not forgotten! There be watchers in the hills, Kafir pig, and their bullets shall not fail thee!"

Maxwell's heart leaped. A whipping in the bazaar—when? But "watchers in the hills"—what could the man mean? Was he about to betray everything in his wild rage of religion?

"Talk less, fool!" laughed Mir Khan shortly, hugely satisfied. "Aye, we be watchers of the hills in truth, we in the Tulwar's Hilt! For that word, thanks. Now send that dog to paradise."

Tense with the strain, Maxwell leaned forward. Steadily the revolver went down till it covered the wretch grovelling there on the stones. A word, and still Shuja'at Din might make a plea for life.

The word was never spoken. One sharp report, a little curl of smoke, and as Madho Rao handed back the revolver the form of the beggar huddled down and lay limp, until a tiny trickle of crimson ran out between the stones.

"It is done, sahib!" and the Ghurka laughed one short, discordant laugh. "O protector of the hills, is it done well?"

Petrovski nodded, watching Maxwell. But Mir Khan stepped forward and held out his hand with a gesture. One of the Afridis picked up the Lee-Enfield rifle and the chieftain stretched it out to the grinning Ghurka.

"Done well, Madho Rao. Thou art a man among men—welcome!"

A roar of acclamation burst out from the crowd. Every nerve shaken by the scene of horror, Maxwell leaped forward with a hoarse cry, discretion fled to the winds, intent only on smashing his fist into the sneering face of his arch-enemy.

But he never reached Petrovski, for a dozen men leaped between. Shouting, kicking, striking, he fought them in a paroxysm of rage, until he found himself gripped between two stalwart hill-men, who minded his struggles no more than if he had been a child.

At the same instant a new sound rose over the shouts—the great throbbing roar of the *chiga*, the alarm drum that stood in the outer courtyard. At a sign from Mir Khan, the Englishman, now pale and weak with the passing of the horror that had come upon him, was dragged back to the dais and forced against the wall.

Into the courtyard men came crowding, men who were not armed with the old muskets of Mir Khan's villagers, but with rifles that spoke of stealings and murders unnumbered. Still the throb of the *chiga* dominated all things, until Mir Khan lifted a hand and it ceased.

“ There is but one God ! ” shouted the chieftain, turning to Maxwell commandingly. “ Kafir, look on these two men ! They stabbed thy sentries ! Look on those beside the gate—they shot down thy sowars in the pass ! Not a rifle here but has drunken the blood of the sirkar, thanks to Allah ! There is but one God, and Mohammed is His prophet ! ”

A roar swelled up afresh as every voice rang out in the *kalima*, the Moslem confession of faith. Mir Khan stood proudly, looking about him with eyes that showed his supreme confidence in these burly ruffians of his, these hill-fighters who had plundered and robbed and murdered so long by stealth, and who were now come forward in the open to defy the sirkar.

It was a great moment for the hill chieftain, for now the mask was off for ever, and again he turned to Maxwell.

“ See, Major sahib ! Yonder in the Tulwar’s Hilt I have a thousand more who are as these few, and from every village and hill-town will pour out the warriors by the hundred and the thousand to serve against the infidel ! Say, will those warriors of yours, who looked so fine on the parade-ground, ever win to the Tulwar’s Hilt when the hills and the valleys are guarded by men such as these ? ”

“ It may well be, Mir Khan,” replied Maxwell, drawing himself up. “ Me, perhaps, you will slay ; but never can the men of the hills prevail against the sirkar, though your Russian guns and your Russian bullets be many as the rocks in the gorges ! And as for you, Madho Rao, it were better for

you to be crucified here than that you ever fall into the power of the raj after what has passed this day ! ”

The Ghurka only laughed tauntingly, and fingered his rifle as Serge Petrovski flung aside the men and leaped to the dais with the grace and litheness of a panther. An instant he gazed into Maxwell's eyes, and his face slowly hardened into a set mask beneath the look of the Englishman.

“ It has been a long fight, Major—a long and bitter fight in the dark—but now the day has dawned upon the hills, and the sirkar will be swept away before the torrent. So you thought you had trapped me there in Peshawur ? ”

“ Aye,” rejoined Maxwell grimly. “ But my comrades would have had the grace to give you a soldier's death at least, instead of handing you over to barbarians for torture.”

The Russian flushed darkly, still searching Maxwell's face, and nodded.

“ Yes. You are a brave man, Major Maxwell, and at least I honour you for it. Had your plans gone aright, we had both been dead men by now. But the game is not yet over, and Serge Petrovski is not to be trapped like a rabbit in the snare. Had your brains been equal to your courage, Maxwell, you had not given me into the hands of a fool with a monocle. Why, I had broken free of them before you and Mir Khan here were out of sight ! ”

The Afridi chief interposed with a laugh.

“ Tell me the tale, Petrovski sahib ! Did you kill any of the Kafir dogs ? ”

“ No,” smiled the Russian carelessly. “ The

gates of the city were just in sight when I struck spurs into my horse, dashed the fool officer out of the way, and broke from the road. They fired after me and killed the horse, but luckily your men were ready and sent them back with a volley. I saw one or two drop, and we were off by the secret path and out of danger. If any fell, it was by the rifles of your men here."

"We killed two of them, *khan*," spoke up a voice, and Mir Khan glanced down at his men exultantly.

"Well done, all of you ! And now, Petrovski sahib, what is your will of this Maxwell sahib? "

For a moment silence fell. Maxwell, once more bitterly regretting his loss of temper, faced the trouble-breeder calmly. Madho Rao was crouching on his heels, chewing away in contentment at his betel-nut, but the Afridis were listening for the verdict with ill-concealed impatience.

"We must get certain secrets from him, Mir Khan," and for a moment the eyes of Russian and Afridi met in a silent message. Maxwell knew well what that message boded, and as he thought of the little packet he had given Marjorie Danton he smiled to himself. "However, we must first learn what the sirkar is about. If any troops are sent up here, as well they may be, we had best leave the place and retire on the Tulwar's Hilt. There we can hold an army at bay while the hills rise in revolt. But if nothing is done there will be no need of haste in the matter. Perhaps it would be as well to tie him up until to-morrow, Mir Khan. Then we will know what is going on in Peshawur, and can set about

the torture, for he will not give up his secrets easily."

For a moment Mir Khan looked at Maxwell, then his eyes lit up.

"Wait! I have a better plan than that, Petrovski sahib! Here, come aside with me," and he drew the Russian out of earshot, speaking low and rapidly. Maxwell saw the face of the trouble-breeder darken into a frown, but finally he nodded and shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will. I like not the means, but the end must be attained. The men had best set forth at once."

Petrovski stepped down and began speaking to a number of the lesser chiefs, who received his instructions with salaams. He could not hear what was said, but caught a quick glint in the face of Madho Rao and wondered.

Was the man's story a true one, after all? If the fellow had really slain the Havildar, it would be natural enough for him to become *ghazi* and join the hillmen. Why, then, had he referred to the watchers of the hills? Such speculation was vain, however, and Maxwell gave it up to face Mir Khan.

"Poor sahib! After all your careful plans, the hillmen have outwitted you!"

"Russian brains, not Afridi brains," rejoined Maxwell. "Were it not for the Russian yonder, you would still be a sheep-herder in the mountains."

The other laughed again. "No matter. Allah works in strange ways, sahib." As Mir Khan spoke, he was playing with the blood-stained Order as a delighted child plays with a new toy. Struck

by a sudden thought, he pinned it to his woollen *lungi*, or shawl, and at the action his men yelled in derision.

Maxwell went white. Trained all his life in the great law that the brown man must respect the white and all his things, no insult could be deeper than this, as Mir Khan knew well. There was cold deliberation in the Englishman's mind as he swiftly jerked his right hand loose and struck Mir Khan heavily across the face.

"That for the insult!" he cried loudly, and sent his fist to the jaw of the man on his left.

An instant later he was standing against the wall, planting well-aimed blows at the men about him, knocking down man after man. Once a rifle went up, but Petrovski knocked it away, shouting to take him alive, and now Maxwell's rugged life stood him in good stead.

The Afridis came surging forward, but went reeling back in fear of those terrible fists. One man lay on the ground hugging a broken jaw and moaning; another lay senseless, others staggered back and drew out of the fight, while Mir Khan raged.

It almost seemed as if the one man would hold off the many by sheer fist-power, for Maxwell fought coolly and methodically.

Then, too late to avoid it, he saw Madho Rao pick up a stone and hurl it swiftly. The jagged fragment struck him glancingly on the head; he staggered, and the next moment something struck his head more heavily, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XII

ACROSS THE HILLS

MAXWELL opened his eyes and looked about him, but a second later closed them as a blinding pain swept into his head. He was lying on his own charpoy, and the native lamp was lighted, so it must be night. Gradually the rush of pain died away, and once more he unclosed his eyes.

Seated at the table was Serge Petrovski, engaged in a quiet game of solitaire. The dull light softened his hawk-like features, but accentuated the line of his iron jaw and thin lips. There was no trace of Russian sensuousness in that face, but, as in Maxwell's own, only an unyielding, indomitable purpose.

After one bitter moment Maxwell sat up, unheeding the fire that darted through his brain at the motion. Petrovski flung down his cards and turned with a smile.

"Awake, Major? Sorry we had to use force, but you'll be all right in a jiffy. How does it feel?"

"Not so badly, thanks." Putting up a hand, Maxwell found his head bandaged. "Gun butt?"

The other nodded. "Feel hungry? It's just an hour after sundown."

"No, thanks, I don't feel like eating. God,

Petrovski, what a dramatist you would have made ! ”

The Russian lit a cheroot with a satisfied smile.

“ I think so myself at times, Major. Quite a pretty scene this afternoon, eh? A couple of weeks ago I was up in the hills, and found a dramatic thing. An old Afghan had been shot beside his fire just after he had unwound the cloth about his beard and got it dyed nicely. He was lying there with his whiskers pointing straight to paradise—a touch of scarlet on the hilltop against the blue sky, with a big vulture standing watching him like some grotesque Afrit.”

“ Interesting, very,” Maxwell commented dryly. “ Well, you seem to have won the first hand, Petrovski. I suppose you know this will mean open war? ”

“ I’m not so sure about that, Major. You are off hunting, you know. It is easy to fall from a cliff or something of the sort. Besides, you might return to Peshawur.”

“ What? ” Maxwell stared. “ Oh, I suppose you want to know some things, eh? Well, you can go hang for all you’ll get out of me.”

“ The labour is ours ; the outcome is with Allah.” Petrovski shrugged his shoulders. “ I would be sorry to hand you to the torturers, Major, for you are a man after my own heart. No, I want only one thing. Mir Khan is a fool. He spoiled half my plans when he was swept away by admiration for a pretty face.”

“ How? ” smiled Maxwell. “ The stone he gave Miss Danton was not the real one, was it? ”

“ You should know best. There were two—the

Sikh's Blood and another, which was cut in its exact shape. Had you not been in Kabul both would have reached Mir Khan ; as it was, the Sikh's Blood vanished suddenly. You see, the other would have served our purpose as well, for none save he and I would have known the difference. But the fool had to give it to a woman, so making more work for me. Now, Major, promise me the real stone and you return to Peshawur in the morning."

" ' Frail as a bubble on a river is man's memory,' " quoted Maxwell ironically. " You and I are men, Petrovski, not children. You know that you will never get that stone, so talk sense. It was a piece of bad luck for you that I happened to find the trader with the real Sikh's Blood ; had I found the other, I would have been fooled. How could you tell the difference between them? "

" There is no difference to the eye, for we tried to fool such men as you. The only difference was in the settings. The Sikh's Blood was set in an amulet, the false stone in a pendant."

" Impossible ! " cried Maxwell. " The Sikh's Blood was set in a pendant, too ! "

Petrovski stared hard at him, a light of wonder in the black eyes that slowly passed to incredulity.

" I do not believe you. Well, it matters not now. What is your word in this? Remember, once I give you over to Mir Khan, things are like to go hard with you, Major."

" As you please. The Sikh's Blood will never come into the hills again."

With a little nod, as if he had expected no other answer, Petrovski shoved his cards into a hip pocket

and clapped his hands. The door opened and Madho Rao, rifle in hand, entered with a salaam.

“Bring the Major sahib what he desires of food or drink, Madho Rao. If he suffers at your hands, or if he escapes, you shall be flayed on the cross. You will be relieved at sunrise.”

The Ghurka salaamed again and shut the door behind Petrovski. Maxwell had sunk his head in his hands, the bitterness of complete failure strong upon him. A moment later he looked up at a touch upon his shoulder, and anger leaped into his eyes.

“You dare to touch me, traitor? Sheitan roast you in Jehannum, son of pigs! Be off where your presence defiles me not!”

To his bewilderment, Madho Rao only grinned and replied softly—

“Your curses will be sweet in the ears of my new comrades, Maxwell sahib. Now listen. I am no traitor, and the Havildar is alive. Allah spoke to me, and I followed you, without orders. For that I may be punished; yet now is the time to act and not talk.”

Maxwell stared, astounded. He remembered the words of Madho Rao in the courtyard, and suddenly leaped up, comprehension in his eyes.

“Is this thing true? You knew——”

“I heard that Sirdar Fath had escaped, presence. I guessed many things. Therefore I slashed myself across the brow here, blooded my knife and my Order—for which may the raj pardon me!—and fled with all speed with what money I could collect. Mir Khan—may Allah curse the dog!—believed my tale when he saw the money.

These Afghan pigs hold their hearts in their money-bags. Well, here am I, hazur. Now let us make swift plans."

Maxwell silently put out his hand, too moved for words. The utter devotion of the man shone through the quiet words. Madho Rao had cast his own coveted Order of Merit at the feet of Mir Khan, and with it the savings of a lifetime, staking life and honour on a desperate cast to save his officer.

He was ready to die as Shuja'at Din had died, and as Maxwell himself had been preparing to die.

"You must get me a poshtin," said Maxwell after a moment, touching the sheepskin coat that had replaced the Ghurka's uniform. "At midnight waken me and we will try to reach the hills. Are the gates guarded?"

"They are closed, presence, but not locked. A single guard is there. Now curse me."

Madho Rao opened the door, and Maxwell poured a flood of Pushtu curses upon him in a loud voice, that drew a laugh from the groups outside. Then he was alone, and, with a full realization of the need of sleep, flung himself down on the couch.

But sleep was far from his eyelids that night. Before him passed the stirring events of the afternoon; the silent form of Shuja'at Din, the defiant Mir Khan, and the rumble of the *chiga* still echoed in his ears.

He recalled the words of Petrovski regarding the Sikh's Blood, and started wide awake.

"But the stone was set in a pendant!" he

muttered, perplexed. "Could there have been any mistake? Were they over-cautious in the matter? Great Scott! Could it be possible?"

He lay there open-eyed while the slow hours passed and quiet settled down upon the place. Suddenly a form stood by him in the darkness, and Madho Rao had returned.

"Here are lungis, presence, and a poshtin. It is midnight."

Maxwell rose in the darkness and wrapped one of the shawls about his head turban-wise. Another served for kummerbund, and over his shoulders he threw the heavy sheepskin coat. A word to Madho Rao, and they stepped out into the night.

The courtyard was silent and deserted. Without concealment the two men walked across to the gate, where a dark form awaited them.

"Is it thou, Shere Ali?" came a voice. "Fool! Women will yet prove thy——"

"Rest in paradise, dog!" grunted the Ghurka, and there was a thud as his knife went home. "Take his rifle, hazur."

Maxwell slung rifle and cartridge-belt over his shoulder, and Madho swung open the heavy wooden gate. A moment later they were walking down toward the village, and Maxwell laughed grimly to himself. The trouble-breeder had not conquered yet, thanks to this little flat-faced, dog-eyed Ghurka!

Well he knew that pursuit would be bitter and relentless. Unless Madho Rao were caught Mir Khan would be the laughing-stock of the hills. And the very existence of the chief depended on his catching Maxwell.

Every secret and open force of Afridi and Russian would be flung out to keep them from Peshawur, but Maxwell vowed to himself that he would not be captured alive.

Mir Khan was not yet ready for revolt, for he lacked the Sikh's Blood, the talisman that would, it seemed, set the whole hill-country in a flame. And now Maxwell guessed that the trouble-breeder had overreached himself. Russia had sent the sacred stone so amply protected that Mir Khan himself had been fooled.

Expecting an amulet, he had received a pendant, and had childishly given it to Marjorie Danton as a plaything. But had he given the real Sikh's Blood—or was the other the real gem? In any case, the northern raj was at that moment in the keeping of a girl.

Madho Rao had more disquieting news than this, however, and he imparted it when the town had been left behind and they were striking straight into the hills.

“ Presence, I have some evil tidings. Do you remember how Mir Khan drew the trouble-breeder apart, in the courtyard, and they spoke together? ”

Maxwell nodded. “ Aye. You overheard? ”

“ I heard, protector. Now, it is said in the cantonments and in the bazaars that Mir Khan fooled the raj neatly by giving away a false Sikh's Blood, and there is much laughter concerning it. But he had a deeper object. Sirdars have been sent forth with men who shall watch the pass and even enter the town, and this was his order : ‘ Ere three suns have passed you shall bring to me the

mem-sahib who wears the Sikh's Blood, or you die ! ' "

" Good God ! " breathed Maxwell hoarsely.
" Are you sure ? "

" As I hope for paradise, presence, such was the order. "

To Maxwell the thing seemed impossible, grotesque. Schooled in the stern creed of colour, imperative where white men rule brown men, it was hard for him to realize that Mir Khan was in savage revolt against every tenet of the raj.

After the first surprise, however, he thought little of it. The order could never be carried out, and it was an absurd thing on the face of it.

The insolence of the chieftain was the thing that stung Maxwell above all—that and the acquiescence of Serge Petrovski.

" The trouble-breeder did not like it, protector, " went on the Ghurka. " But when Mir Khan said that through her you could be forced to their will he consented. "

The words answered his unspoken thought, and Maxwell nodded. Now, however, the matter of their own escape was uppermost again, and a difficult problem it was. Their only chance lay in a straight dash across the hills, avoiding all paths and sheep-tracks, for the pass.

With the sunrise they were surrounded by naked mountain-ridges like long surges of the ocean swell, while distant snow-peaks glinted like foam-decked rollers above the mist that filled the valleys.

In the most inaccessible places, even on high

cliffs far above the villages, were scattered *zyarats*, rag-tufted shrines of holy men to which offerings were brought.

"*Kya !*" mumbled Madho Rao with his mouth full as he and Maxwell divided a bowl of *halwa*, or pudding, obtained from one of these. "I'll warrant few enough of these cover the bones of a *syud*, or holy man, sahib ! Let an Afghan find a heap of stones, and he will add a rag thereto and imagine the saint beneath. Comes a mullah, tears a strip from his green turban, sets it on a stick, invents a miraculous legend, and pilgrims flock to him with rupees and offerings. Saints and holy places be easily made in Afghanistan, sahib !"

"And elsewhere as well," laughed Maxwell. "How far from Peshawur are we, think you?"

"Allah only knows, presence. But we have made a good march, and the pass road cannot be far ahead. In this cursed country one never knows where to seek for anything. The road may be over that hill, or a dozen miles away."

"If I dared go down to a village, it would be an easy matter, but by this time there are bullets waiting everywhere."

"No, that's out of the question, Madho. Had we best hide during this day or not? Every hour that we delay means added danger, naturally."

It was not his own danger that troubled Maxwell, for with the hours he had come to believe that Mir Khan was in earnest in the effort to carry off Marjorie. It was impossible, of course, but the very thought chafed him. Perhaps the

cunning little Ghurka read the eyes of his officer, for he chuckled.

"Danger is as a poshtin to a watcher of the hills ; but even the poshtin is not worn when the sun is warm. Let us keep to the hills, presence, and hasten on. Ere noon, I believe, we shall reach the road."

Maxwell nodded. Through necessity they had taken a circuitous course, avoiding the hill road to Khotal Digar and the valley villages, where swift danger would be upon them.

By this time it was certain that every tribesman between Khotal Digar and Peshawur would be searching for the two fugitives ; but Maxwell knew the hills as surely as did the outlaws of the Tulwar's Hilt.

"Could we but strike upon the Khyber Rifles," said he as they crossed the brow of a long ridge by a faint sheep-track, "we would be safe. But no doubt Mir Khan has thrown out his men along every foot of the road. By this time, perhaps, the Rifles have been taken off their guard and killed. A few scattered men could do nothing against a systematic attack."

His words were prophetic. Madho Rao, in advance, suddenly stopped on reaching the crest of the hill, turning a steep face of rock. A little cry broke from him, and as Maxwell came up the Ghurka pressed him down on his face away from the skyline.

"The road, sahib—and Peshawur ! It is even as I said we would come upon it !"

It was a magnificent scene that met the eyes of Maxwell, peering over scattered rock. A

thousand yards below ran the serpentine of the white road, deserted save for a solitary camel sowar, riding in from Kabul way, perhaps with dispatches. A spur of the hills hid Peshawur from sight, though the old palace itself was visible.

In view from their eminence, though well hidden from the road, was a party of hillsmen, and Maxwell uttered a quick curse. To one side he saw the huddled form of a Kyber Rifle, doubtless assassinated as he watched. But though their keen eyes followed the camel sowar longingly, the hillsmen did not molest him, and the fact was significant.

"We'll have to circle around," and Maxwell crawled back a few feet. "If we cross this spur of hills, we will be above the plain and Peshawur."

The Ghurka nodded. Both men knew that this last mile or two would prove the most difficult of all, for the hillmen were only too plainly bent on stopping Maxwell at all costs, and every foot of the way would have to be covered with the utmost caution.

Now it was that these watchers of the hills brought all their long years of training into play. Once they crept a hundred feet above a post of five men unheard and unseen ; at another time Maxwell pulled the Ghurka down just as a man rose from among the rocks of the next hill, scanning each crest and valley for some sign of the fugitives.

But at length they reached their goal—the last low crest that overlooked the road, the plain, and the city far beyond toward whose gates the camel

sowar was just disappearing. Below them was another outpost of the tribesmen, a score of men being grouped about a tiny fire by which chupattis were baking.

"Now, sahib," grunted Madho Rao as he settled down comfortably on his heels and partook of a pill of opium to stay his hunger and thirst, "there are but two ways in which we may reach the city of roses past those men. The most probable is that we shall remain here until men ride forth to seek the Rifles, which will be to-night or in the morning."

"That's our best chance, certainly. And the other?"

"The other, presence, is that Mir-Khan's men capture the General sahib's daughter, in which case they will give over the watch and depart, for the alarm will then have been given, and pursuit will be swift."

Maxwell looked at the other uneasily.

"Surely there is no chance of that, Madho Rao! It would be impossible to kidnap her from the heart of the city."

"The ways of God are immutable, presence! I talked not of the city. It is well known that the mem-sahib rides much, and loves to look upon the pass, for so Mir Khan told his men."

Now for the first time Maxwell was besieged by real anxiety; but none the less it seemed a wildly improbable thing that Marjorie Danton could be so captured. As the hours passed, and the sun blazed down upon them, his anxiety lessened, for with another night they would be in Peshawur with warning.

Tortured by thirst and flies, tantalized by the smell of cooking meat below them, the two lay motionless until the afternoon had begun to wane. Suddenly Madho Rao, after a long look around, touched Maxwell's arm, and the officer awoke from his doze.

"There are two riders on the plains, presence ! They come from the city."

Maxwell peered forth cautiously. Then a startled groan broke from him.

"The fool—the fool ! How has this thing happened? "

For, though at that distance the forms of the riders were not to be made out, Maxwell's keen eyes had distinguished the peculiar black-and-white pony that Archibald of the civil staff always rode, and beside it the cream-white pony of Marjorie Danton.

CHAPTER XIII

"THE RAJ, SAHIB!"

THERE was a little stir among the watching hill-men, and one of the men flung a handful of powder on the fire. There came one bright, sharp flash, and a little plume of white smoke rose and was lost in the air. Instantly Maxwell motioned the Ghurka to caution.

"It is a signal, Madho."

And a signal it was, for on the other side of the road a man rose from the rocks, waved his hand, and sank back, whereupon other men came to join the party below, until instead of a score there were forty, all watching eagerly the dots on the winding road beyond the jaws of the pass.

"It is written, protector, that on a fair road men ride hard to their death, and so it is. See, the riders are racing!"

"You lie!" exclaimed Maxwell hoarsely, screening his eyes from the sun.

"Tongues may lie, sahib, but eyes never," returned the Ghurka, with a shrug.

Hardly able to credit the sight, Maxwell saw that the two ponies were indeed at a run, and seemed to be racing. A groan broke from his lips, and he cursed Archibald in all the fluent ways of Pushtu. Then his sun-darkened face settled into lines of decision.

"There's only one thing to do, Madho Rao—we must warn that fool of his folly and save the mem-sahib. When I fire do you empty your rifle into these men below. We can stand them off for a time, and Archibald sahib will take warning. Indeed, we may be able to hold out until troops are sent out from the city."

As he spoke he caught up his rifle. Madho Rao, however, made no move toward his own weapon. Sudden anxiety shot into his flat face, and one hand fell on Maxwell's arm in protesting deference.

"But, sahib! There are men all about us, and our cartridges are few. We shall be slain to a certainty, and a living dog is more terrible than a dead tiger."

Maxwell turned on the man in amazement. Madho Rao afraid of death! The thought was ludicrous after the events of the day before, and he laughed heartily.

"What words are these? Since when has Madho Rao been frightened by the face of danger? Up with your rifle, man—or do you fear the wrath of Allah if you fire on true believers?"

"Presence, thy servant is not a fool!" Quiet dignity shone in the face of the man as he met the angry grey eyes and read their thought.

It had suddenly come to Maxwell that before the infidel there is a freemasonry among all Moslems which vanquishes sect-feud and blood-feud for the moment. He was instantly ashamed of his suspicion, however, and put out a hand.

"Pardon, Madho Rao. You are a man, indeed,

and now let us die like men that the mem-sahib may be saved."

The Ghurka only shook his head stubbornly, with a swift glance at the two riders, now a scant half-mile away.

"In the name of Allah, speak!" exclaimed Maxwell angrily. "If you fear to die, then leave me quickly!"

"Pardon, protector of the helpless!" Madho Rao had raised his officer's hand to his forehead as the earnest words broke forth. "Is there not one thing that you have made to fill the ears of your children? Have you not told us often that there is a thing greater than life, than friends or home—aye, even greater than our faith itself?"

Maxwell turned impatiently and raised his rifle. Then he paused as a bitter cry broke from the lips of Madho Rao.

"The raj, sahib! Have you, then, lied to us? Would you place the life and honour of a woman above the safety of the raj, Maxwell sahib?"

Maxwell's rifle went down. He turned upon the Ghurka a face that was drawn and grey, for the man had spoken the truth. All these years had he schooled himself and his men to that one thought, and now he was put to the test with a vengeance.

He alone, with this man beside him, knew of what was going on among the hills. He alone could guide the army to the Tulwar's Hilt. He alone knew where lay the Sikh's Blood, the talisman that could rouse all the hill tribes or hold them quiet. And—he alone could save the woman he loved.

"God help me!" The bitter words broke from him in a groan. His own life was a little thing to him; but to his Service it meant everything. If he gave his life to save Marjorie, as he most certainly would, there would be bitter days ahead for the raj.

The Tulwar's Hilt must fall ultimately, but at terrible cost of blood, and money, and life, which he alone could avoid.

There lay his duty plain before him. The hillsmen would carry off the woman he loved, leaving the way clear to Peshawur.

He had but to hold his hand, to make sacrifice of those two lives below him, and the culmination of his years of strife and danger would be at hand. But every instinct of his nature revolted at the thing.

"God!" he cried again, gazing with terrible eyes upon the little brown man at his side. "It is not the *dastur* of sahibs to see their womenfolk in danger! Would you have me a man without izzat, dishonoured? And—and I love her, man! I love her!"

"The raj, sahib!" Poor Madho Rao himself was in torment, for he knew the agony of the man he loved above all other men, yet his voice rang with horrible sureness and truth in Maxwell's ears.

"O presence, have I not lost my honour for your sake? Am I not marked down a deserter, a traitor to the raj—have I not given my all, even as you have ordained in days past? And after this you would have me go home to my people and say, 'The sahibs are as women, for they

bid us do one thing and they themselves do another through fear.' What is *thy* izzat to the izzat of the raj? What is thy love compared to thy duty, Maxwell sahib? Pardon the words of thy servant, hazur!"

Cold sweat stood out on Maxwell's brow while he listened, but in that instant he knew that he had made his decision. Before that lean, agony-stricken face the Ghurka shrank back involuntarily, and he shrank again as Maxwell gave to him the title of honour which the hillsmen still use, but which in the lower country has become sacred to the ruling race.

"You have shamed me, Madho sahib, for you are a better man than I. You shall have no cause to name me liar, for we shall bide here and watch. But before my God I swear that after this no man will get mercy at my hands!"

"Upon the Koran, sahib!" assented Madho Rao, his eyes glowing, for now his officer had become a man after his own fierce soul.

Maxwell turned—bitter anguish in his heart, but his face set and cold. Now he could see the reason for that seeming race. Instead of being a race, the cream-white pony had taken the bit between his teeth and was plunging madly ahead, while the frightened Archibald was slowly, very slowly, overtaking the runaway.

The two score hillsmen had spread out now, and across the road Maxwell could see others, waiting behind the rocks.

The watching man understood it all. Marjorie had doubtless led the way for a short ride beyond the city, her new pony had taken fright at some-

thing, and the pounding of Archibald's steed behind had only driven him to more frenzied madness after the manner of such beasts.

Archibald should never have consented to pass the last sentry, thought Maxwell bitterly.

"Pray God he dies like a man!" he muttered, for now the end was not far away.

There was no fear on the face of the girl as she tugged at her bridle vainly, and Maxwell was glad that at least she would know nothing of the horror of her fate until it had come upon her. It was nearly sunset now, and he turned to Madho Rao suddenly.

"Listen, comrade! When they depart do you follow them while I hasten to the General sahib. Now there will be war, and before midnight I will lead out men upon the trail. Meet me with word as to whether they take her to Khotal Digar or to the Tulwar's Hilt. It may yet be that by hard riding we can reach Khotal Digar by sunrise and catch them unprepared."

"It is an order, presence," nodded the Ghurka. "Before I go let it be permitted to take of the food that is about the fire yonder, for I have little opium left."

Maxwell nodded and handed over his little box of unused opium, which meant life and vigour to the Ghurka. The two horses were now but a hundred yards away, but the waiting hillsmen evidently meant to make sure of their prey, though every rifle was covering the approaching beasts.

A moment later Archibald, blood dripping from his spurs, pounded up beside the cream-white pony, and set hand upon its bridle. Even as he leaned

back in his saddle to pull up, however, a dark figure rose among the rocks.

A sharp crack echoed up to those on the crest, and the next instant the cream-white pony plunged forward in death.

As the steed fell Marjorie was flung forward over his shoulder. A single groan broke from Maxwell, but she lay motionless in the dust of the road. Instantly a crowd of dark figures burst from the rocks, rushing toward her.

The two men on the hill-crest leaned forward—the one with eyes glittering and with hand on knife, the other with tense, cold features and mouth compressed into a single thin line. For Archibald was dying like a man, and there was a horrible fascination in the sight.

As Marjorie's pony rolled forward Archibald had reigned up his steed so sharply that the beast all but went over backward, and one wild cry broke from the man as he realized everything. He could yet have wheeled about and escaped, but cub though he might be, he was of the wolf's breed.

A revolver gleamed in his hand, and as the crowd of hillsmen rushed out he spurred forward into the midst of them.

Thrice he fired, and he burst through the crowd with three bodies stretched out behind; but as he pulled up beside the motionless figure in riding-dress a little flash of fire seemed to run along the face of the hill.

Pierced by a dozen bullets and slugs, Archibald slumped down over his pony's neck and fell forward into the dust. One little sob of fury

burst from Maxwell's lips at the sight, and his hands clenched in self-repression.

The work was done, and the bitter wish drove through his mind that he had died there beside Archibald.

"The fool has atoned for his folly," muttered Madho Rao ; but Maxwell had no heart to rebuke him for the words, ill as they sounded in the mouth of a native.

A single wild shout of "*Allahu akbar !*" shrilled up to them, and the motley throng of Afghans, Pathans, and Afridis fell to work.

One tore the revolver from Archibald's hand, while others constructed a rude dhoolie out of shawls and rifles.

The pied pony stood unheeded beside his motionless master, and since the hillsmen disregarded this valuable trophy, Maxwell guessed that they would make all speed over the hill-paths with their captive.

So, indeed, it proved. No sooner was the litter finished than Marjorie, evidently no more than stunned by her fall, was placed in it and four men picked her up, another spreading his lungi over her, for the sun was almost down and the night would be cold. A sharp command from the sirdar in charge of the party and the hillsmen, now about sixty strong, moved off up the road.

As he looked down upon the scene Maxwell's thoughts reverted to the words of Serge Petrovski the night before : "A touch of scarlet on the hilltop against the blue sky, with a big vulture standing watching like some grotesque Afrit."

It was no crimson-whiskered Afghan lying there, but a white-faced boy, a trickle of scarlet on his cheek; and overhead, in the red glow of the mountain-hid sun, hovered a single dark speck that swiftly drew nearer. A low whinny from the pied pony aroused Maxwell.

"Come, Madho Rao. It is done, and now comes vengeance."

He handed over what cartridges he had taken from the Afridi at the Khotal Digar gate, and the two men began the descent of the steep hill.

Before they had finished the black speck darted down before them and became a wrinkle-necked vulture, who remained with speculative, horrible eyes fixed on the pied pony, waiting.

Maxwell paused and raised his rifle, for the danger was gone, and the Ghurka uttered a grunt of satisfaction as the vulture lay limp at the shot. But already there was another dark speck in the sky, and another, until Maxwell smiled wryly at his own impulsive action.

Finally they stood in the road as the sun shot away for the night. Madho Rao turned to the fire of the hillsmen, clutching greedily at chupattis and scorched meat, but Maxwell strode forward to the side of the pony.

"Poor old fellow!" And for a moment he stood whispering the strange horse-talk that the *saices* use, until the pony nuzzled his neck. Then he looked down at the silent form of Archibald, and as he did so the cub's eyelids opened. Instantly Maxwell was on his knees, with a hoarse shout to the Ghurka.

It was useless. As he pillowed the broken head

on his arm Maxwell caught one faint look of recognition that died away in a moment.

"Maxwell—thank God!—save her——"

Archibald was dead before Madho Rao reached them, and Maxwell laid back the head of the man he might have saved with an agony of remorse tearing at his heart.

With a glance at the specks looming large in the darkening sky above, he threw his poshtin over the silent form. Sheikh, the cream-white pony, had been shot through the brain.

"Now go!" ordered Maxwell quietly. "They will take that hillpath that leads from the road a half-mile up the pass. Be wary, for if you fall into the hands of Mir Khan your death will be one to be talked of, comrade."

The Ghurka flashed an ugly grin at the covered body, saluted, and was gone—a shadow that slipped into the quick darkness which had descended on the valley.

For a moment sudden faintness came upon Maxwell; his wounded head was throbbing, thirst and hunger and that terrible march over the hills had weakened him; but he caught at the saddle and swung himself up, summoning his iron will to the task.

"*Jaldi jao!*" he cried, and the pony swung about to the Hindu order. "There is still a chance, if I can reach the General. You want war, and you shall have it, Mir Khan!"

The thought rallied him, and he ceased to sway in the saddle, urging the pony to a gallop. The lights of the city blinked out at him from ahead, and at the faint notes of a bugle he felt a sob in his throat.

What terrible news this would be for the old General, the grey-haired man who had been as a father to him through these years !

A spasm of sickness came upon him, and he sagged forward, but again his stern will forced him upright. News—news for Peshawur, news for Simla, news for all India !

The Rifles murdered, a civilian slain, the General's daughter carried away—and the trouble-breeder in the Tulwar's Hilt !

"Faster !" he groaned hoarsely, digging his spurless heels into the pony's rowelled flanks. Then came a swift thought that all but vanquished him. Where was the Sikh's Blood ?

Had Marjorie kept the little packet with her ? Whether or no, at all events she had the pendant given her by Mir Khan, and the false stone would serve equally as well—no !

Once more the hillsman had defeated himself, for he had spread the news of his trick upon the sirkar, and every man in the hills would know that the pendant held the spurious gem !

"There is a chance yet !" he muttered grimly. "At midnight I will start with the Lancers, and Heaven help any of those devils who fall into my hands now ! If I had but a company of Sikhs, how we would make the Afghans grunt !"

The thought brought a mirthless grin to his staring-eyed face, for Sikh and Afghan will never be friends until white merges with black. Were India to turn her Sikh regiments loose upon the hill country, there would be such war as even that land of blood has never seen since Rajput days.

With three hours of sleep he would be a new

man, and there would be no waiting now for Simla to act. He swept forward at a gallop, now reeling in the saddle and now pulling himself sharply up, until a few moments later a figure stepped out into the road in front.

"Halt! Who goes?"

"Friend—Major Maxwell!" he managed to gasp out, and swept past to see the sentry's rifle come to the "present." The pony turned toward the stables, but Maxwell jerked his head around again toward the bungalow of the General, which he could see ahead. The guard attempted to stop him, but Maxwell cried out his name and pounded past, drawing rein as a sais ran out. For a second he was too weak to swing down from the saddle, and as the native helped him the plainly anxious figure of the General came out to the veranda.

"That you, Archibald? Where's Marjorie?"

"It's Maxwell, sir," and the officer stumbled forward. "Archibald's dead—in the pass—Mir Khan has carried off Marjorie. Rifles murdered—have Lancers ready to start at midnight for Khotal Digar—there's a chance yet—"

And Raymond Maxwell pitched forward to the veranda steps, unconscious.

CHAPTER XIV

TOO LATE

ALTHOUGH Maxwell had chafed and fretted over each petty delay, General Danton was too much the soldier to fling away his men, even to save his own child. So it happened that when Colonel Peyton's force reached Khotal Digar the sun was already three hours high, for the two infantry battalions, Ghurkas and Sikhs, had held the force back.

None the less, they had made a tremendous march at the call of Maxwell. Vainly did he implore Colonel Peyton to let him ride on with his squadron of Lancers, for the veteran refused flatly.

"It may be a trap, Raymond. Wait."

So he had waited, fuming impotently. Half-way on their road they met Madho Rao, who informed them that Marjorie had been taken direct to Khotal Digar. He had watched the hillsmen enter, and had then returned to meet the force.

Their approach had been watched by scouts on the hill crests, but not a shot had been fired as they advanced. An ominous silence pervaded the hill country, and the villages they passed were silent and deserted.

A squad had brought in the body of Archibald

the night before, and Peshawur had been stirred to its depths by the tidings.

When Maxwell found, after a few hours' sleep, that he could not possibly go without infantry and a convoy of supplies, he asked for Sikhs—and got them. Then he asked that Colonel Peyton be placed in command of the flying column, and found that it had already been so ordained.

Maxwell's grim craving for vengeance had not been satisfied on that march, however, and now, as he studied Khotal Digar through his glasses, he was very suspicious of the easy advance that had been accorded them.

"The town is not deserted, but the fort seems to be," he observed to the Colonel. "I'm afraid you were right about a trap, for this quiet advance of ours is at variance with all custom and tradition. I'd better ride ahead with my men and have a look."

The other nodded. "Wait till I've deployed the men, Raymond, and then I'll go with you."

More delay! As Maxwell sat his horse in impatient waiting, a little whisper ran through his Lancers, who were to the full as impatient as he, that their commander had gone *musth*. When it reached Madho Rao, now the hero of the squadron, he stopped it with a vicious hiss.

"Fools! Be silent! It is not madness—it is the blood-thirst!"

For the torture of Maxwell's mind was written plain in his face. Worn and gaunt as it was, the mental agony had done more than mere physical pain to stamp itself in those eyes and about that close-lipped mouth. Madho Rao read the look

aright, for in Maxwell's mind was the determination to slay and spare not when the time came.

Finally the weary but eager Sikhs and Ghurkas were deployed about the fort, and under cover of their rifles Colonel Peyton and Maxwell led the squadron of Lancers to the gates. As they did so Maxwell saw that the local mullah, the malik or headman of the place, and two or three other natives were coming out to meet them.

"May you be in the sanctity of God—" began the malik, with the usual fulsome greeting, but Maxwell cut him short.

"Enough! Where is Mir Khan?"

The headman drew himself up with injured pride, but wilted at Maxwell's furious eyes.

"Sahib, he has been called away, and has left us here to offer you the hospitality of his fort. Enter, lord, and treat it as your own."

"With good reason," Maxwell grunted, as the gates of the fort swung open before them, showing a deserted interior.

"What do you think of it?" asked the Colonel doubtfully.

"They wouldn't dare attempt treachery against such a force, sir. Mir Khan has no doubt slipped on to the Tulwar's Hilt, leaving the villagers to blind us. I think you may order up the troops and supplies safely, sir. And now, will you kindly give me permission to extract certain information in my own way?"

"Certainly, Raymond."

While Colonel Peyton dispatched one of his little staff with orders for the troops to enter the fort,

Maxwell turned to the group of natives and singled out the mullah.

"Where is the Feringee woman who was brought here last night?"

With infinite astonishment the mullah salaamed low and expressed his inability to give the desired information.

"By the beard of the Prophet, sahib, I have heard of no Feringee woman in these hills. Surely there must be some mistake."

"Petrovski sahib has gone with Mir Khan?"

Once more blank amazement. The mullah, although the holy man of the place, had not heard of such a one as Petrovski sahib, it appeared.

"Very well!" snapped Maxwell curtly. "Madho Rao! Govind Jal! Amrit Singh!"

The Ghurka and two stalwart, heavily bearded Sikhs strode forward and saluted.

"Bind the mullah, the headman, and two more of these men."

Amid loud protestations, wails of innocence, and oaths on the Koran that they were helpless underlings who knew nothing of their lord's doings, the men were bound.

Maxwell pointed across the courtyard to the dwelling which had served him as guest-house and prison the day before.

"Take as many Sikhs as you will and lead those men thither. Shut the door, and come not into my presence again until they have spoken. *Hukum hai!*"

"It is an order, Major sahib!" echoed the three, savage with joy, and turned to their work.

Delight rippled down the line of the Lancers as the four prisoners were led to the hut, cursing with Afghan vehemence. The few villagers left, ashen grey with terror, departed hastily, and Colonel Peyton rode to Maxwell's side as the Lancers scattered to search the fort.

"My dear fellow," said the veteran protestingly, "do you know what this means? Have you deliberately given those men to the Sikhs to torture?"

"I have given them over to be made to talk," returned Maxwell, his face cold and impassive, his sunken eyes scanning the lines of men filing through the gates. The other looked at him anxiously. "What do I care how they are made talk? Have I not been tortured by these devils?"

Peyton turned away with a shudder as one low, choking scream rang out dully from the hard mud building. Maxwell's eyes went to the door, but it did not open. A Rissaldar strode up, his spurs clanking on the stones, and saluted.

"Presence, the place is empty, save for the women of the zenana, who are still here."

"Very good," returned the Colonel. "Place guards at the doors and let no one enter. Lieutenant French, see that sentries are posted on the walls and get the mule-guns set up. Do you think we'll have trouble, Maxwell?"

"Impossible to say, sir. I fancy that Mir Khan—or the trouble-breeder—made all haste to reach the Tulwar's Hilt with Miss Danton. On the other hand, they may have sent for reinforcements, expecting that only a small force would pursue

here and that they would cut it off. Mir Khan has enough men to give us a very stiff time."

"Well, we are all pretty well done up. Let the men rest, French—yes, that's all. Captain Ormes, get the heliograph set up right away, will you? That tower in the centre of the place would be excellent." The grizzled Colonel turned and put a hand on Maxwell's shoulder.

"Come, Raymond, you need rest pretty badly. We can do nothing now, at all events, and you ought to take it easy after that march and all you've been through."

"Time enough—ah!" Maxwell's reply broke off suddenly as the door of the hut was opened and Govind Jal strode out. There was a wild ferocity in the Sikh's eyes as he saluted and delivered his message—

"The men are ready to speak, Major sahib."

As Maxwell's tall figure vanished in the doorway the Sikhs and Ghurkas exchanged delighted grins, while the white officers and subalterns glanced anxiously at one another.

From Colonel Peyton down, not one of them blamed Maxwell; none the less, it was not a thing to be talked of in cantonments or at mess, and so the youngsters were given to understand by the older officers.

Headquarters had been established in one of the larger buildings, and when Maxwell finally entered, Peyton sprang to his feet eagerly at sight of the other's face.

"Raymond—you have news? They talked freely?"

"Yes, freely," repeated Maxwell, with a grim

smile. "Fairly good news, Colonel. She was carried in last night, unharmed. This morning word of our force was brought in. Mir Khan and Petrovski had a stormy scene, it is said, and finally the trouble-breeder was sent off in charge of her barely an hour before we arrived."

"By Gad!" exclaimed Peyton warmly. "Looks as if he's a gentleman, eh?"

"So it would seem, sir. But that's not all. Mir Khan is waiting for more men from the fortress, and I should judge that we might expect an attack something after midnight, or more likely at dawn."

"Thank God, she is safe for the present at least, my boy!" The two men gripped hands for a moment. "Now take this charpoy here and get to sleep; I'll waken you if any news comes in or if we need you."

Maxwell resisted no further. Utterly exhausted, he flung himself down on the couch and was asleep almost instantly.

When he awoke it was with a sense of unreality, for the night had come and he was alone in the hut. Getting to his feet, he went to the doorway, and, holding out his wrist-watch to the moonlight, saw that it was nearly nine.

"Great Scott!" he thought with a laugh. "I've almost slept the clock around!"

It was a magnificent scene that met his eye as he strolled to the gates. The hill crests and valleys were bathed in silver moonlight, and on the far hillsides could be seen the flickering watch-fires of the hillsmen, like red stars that had fallen from above. The bayonets of the sentries lined

the walls like blue-white sparks, but only a low murmur of talk and the uneasy shuffling of transport animals and horses broke the silence. Maxwell walked up to a sentry.

"Where is the Colonel sahib?"

"In the palace, presence—yonder, where the sentry is at the door."

Maxwell nodded. A moment later he entered one of the rooms in the "palace," which Colonel Peyton had occupied. The Colonel and his tiny staff were just being served with pulao and halwa, and greeted Maxwell with a shout of delight.

"I was just sending to call you, Raymond!" exclaimed Peyton. "Here, sit down!"

"Spoils of war, eh?" smiled Maxwell. "Well, this is better than Army beef!"

Refreshed by his long sleep, feeling like a new man, Maxwell would have thoroughly enjoyed that meal had it not been for the anxiety that gnawed at his heart. When he and Peyton were alone he turned gravely to the older man.

"How long will it be, Colonel, before the General arrives with the column?"

"Two days, perhaps three, Raymond. Or they might get here by to-morrow night. It's largely dependent on how Simla views the case. Don't get impatient, old chap."

Maxwell smiled acridly. "Easy to say, Peyton—but this suspense is damnable! If you don't mind, I'll wait till to-morrow night, then take a few Ghurkas and set off across the hills. I might be able to get into the Hilt with their help, and——"

"Listen, boy," broke in the other soberly. "That is a mad proposition—mad! You should

know it better than I. You could do her no good if you were there, and we need you to guide the column."

"I'm not so sure that it's a mad scheme," frowned Maxwell. "Once we got across the hills, I believe I could pass for a tribesman in the Hilt. And God knows she will need a friendly arm there!"

"But, my dear fellow, if you were discovered?"

"I've been there before, Colonel, without discovery. Besides, I could send back the Ghurkas, and we might get hold of some important news. Really, the stiffest part of it lies in getting over the hills. We'll have to compass out a new route, but I know those hills fairly well, and so does Madho Rao. By the way, that beggar ought to be recompensed for the way he pulled me out of Mir Khan's hands!"

The other nodded. "The General said something about it, and will remember. But if you take this suicidal trip, Raymond, what about the column itself?"

"Bring out your maps, and we'll soon settle that," smiled Maxwell. "I can give you a pretty good idea of the whole lay-out, Colonel."

Although obviously troubled, Colonel Peyton could offer no objection to his plan. Maxwell was not attached to the force, save as a guide, and the fact was evident that if he succeeded in getting through he would be of far greater use than if he remained with the column.

Hour after hour the two men pored over the maps, while Maxwell unfolded the secrets that were

locked in his mind. He described every foot of the way, by the only paths accessible to artillery, made sketches and suggestions for passing the most dangerous points, and when he had finally finished he sent for Madho Rao to give confirmation.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Colonel, glancing at his watch. "Do you know we've been working over this thing all night, Raymond?"

Maxwell smiled. "I'm quite aware of that fact, my dear Peyton! And I assure you that the trouble-breeder has spent more than one such night before he got the Tulwar's Hilt built and— Ah! come in, Madho Rao."

The alert, quiet little Ghurka carefully inspected the plans and charts, made one or two changes, and finally reported that all was correctly mapped out.

Barely had he spoken when a rifle rang out from the walls, followed by a quick challenge. In the hills the Sikhs are wont to fire first and challenge after, and with good reason.

Maxwell's cry of alarm was drowned in a roar of musketry. Instantly the three men were outside, as the bugles sounded the alarm. It was almost dawn, and Mir Khan had evidently thought to surprise the fort.

French, in command of the Maxims and nine-pounders, lost no time in opening up. But the hillsmen were under the very walls, and with a roar the wooden gates were blown in by a petard, while a second later the Afridis and Afghans poured a deadly fire into the courtyard as they charged gallantly. From the first shot until the

hillsmen swarmed into the courtyard was a scant five minutes, and for a moment it seemed that the fort was lost.

Then the Sikhs had formed up, and Maxwell, knowing his men, did not stop for orders from the Colonel. At his sharp words the bayonets flashed out and clicked home; one or two of the Sikhs went down under that first volley, through the shattered gate, and as the dark forms rushed in with their exultant yells of "*Allahu akbar!*" Maxwell loosed his men.

"*Wah! Guru!*"

The terrible Sikh battle-yell rose above the rippling crash of the Maxims, as it had risen from the Sutlej to the Jumna in years gone by. Not a man replied to the Martini-Henris that spat out from the swarm of Afghans, dropping them by twos and threes; but where the charging lines met there was one white flash of steel in the grey dawn, and the Sikhs fell to work.

"*Wah! Guru! Guru!*"

Torches flared up now, and Maxwell had one fleeting glimpse of that stabbing mob of men; then Peyton's bugler sounded the recall as the hillsmen broke, and through the gateway the bullets began to pour anew.

The Sikhs, their bayonets dripping blood, paused to fire their first volley, and a Maxim arrived to hold the shattered gateway.

On the walls the Ghurkas and Lancers were firing slowly and steadily, and the nine-pounders were searching out the enemy. The attack had failed, and a moment later the "cease firing" rang out.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Colonel Peyton, "that was a near thing! And how those Sikhs went for them!"

"They'll be the envy of their regiment," smiled Maxwell grimly. "Well, Mir Khan's little trap has failed to work—and now to count the cost."

That terrible Sikh bayonet work had been deadly enough, for some sixty hillsmen were found inside the gates—and every one of them dead. The loss outside must have been heavier still, but only twenty Sikhs had gone down and half as many Ghurkas.

The whole affair was over in ten minutes, but it was long to be related in Peshawur how the Sikh steel had cloven that morning.

When breakfast was over Maxwell took charge of the burying-squad by his own wish, and half an hour later Colonel Peyton found him stooping over a little pile of lungis, high-laced boots, and weapons.

"We've caught the heliograph-station in the pass, Raymond! The column has started, and will probably be here to-night— Good heavens, man! what are you doing with that stuff?"

"Selecting my costume for the Tulwar's Hilt," and Maxwell's rare smile flashed out for a moment.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE TULWAR'S HILT

IT was the sixth evening. The earth had disappeared and become rock—rock that lay about in all shapes and sizes, rock pierced only by parched tufts of grass, rock that ran up and down and across in weird streaks, rock that jutted up into the dark blue of the cold night sky and fell away into the black of hidden lakes.

Far overhead iron-hued crags shot out dull against the sky in the last glow of sunset as Maxwell and three men, huddled together in the shelter of the cliff, stirred from their sleep. Haggard and worn with the slow night-climbing, the face of the stalwart Pathan was keener and grimmer than ever.

For these five nights he had led his little party across the wastes of desolation, sleeping and hiding from the blinding glare of day, pushing on with darkness across sulphur streams and copper-streaked crags, daring to light no fire, with only a poshtin to protect from the hurricane winds that lashed the naked crags.

The day before their supply of food had been lost in a rain-swollen nullah; but Maxwell had driven them on, for behind was a spur—the crackle and faint rattle of musketry and rifle fire.

Behind them, off to one side where the hill road ran its tortuous course, the column was fighting its way foot by foot, every man filled with a lust for vengeance that brooked no opposition, from the sorrow-worn General to the lowliest camel-driver.

Above the four men towered the gloom of the Suleiman range, and somewhere down below them rang out a faint ripple of water. In that horror of rocks even Maxwell's acute senses had gone astray, and for two nights they had wandered vainly before he came upon a landmark of the secret pathways.

Then three of the six Ghurkas had been sent back to serve as guides to the column, while he and the others had pushed on to the Tulwar's Hilt, whose single beacon outflashed above them at this moment.

"It is a tremendously strong place, Madho Rao," and Maxwell peered at the long-hidden fortress, dimly visible in the starlight. "Still, there was a way up that side wall, as we saw this afternoon."

The fort was indeed a marvel of strength, even for that land of forts. As if a gigantic broken stratum had been shoved bodily upward from the valley, there was an inclined ridge of rock, precipitous on all sides save for the inclined ascent, the hypotenuse of the triangle.

It seemed impregnable, towering above the crags around—a black ridge of basalt, from which ran the ribbon of white road in a slender curve that formed the blade of the Tulwar. From a distance, indeed, it was easy to see whence came

the name of the place, and Maxwell looked across the deep valley in frank admiration.

"Look, presence!"

At the touch on his arm he turned to the pointing finger. From somewhere among the hills, perhaps a dozen miles away, a finger of light quavered up across the sky and died down again with a faint mutter.

"By heavens, a searchlight!" ejaculated Maxwell. "The General isn't losing any time—guns, too! Listen, Madho Rao. How far behind us the column is I do not know, but once I have gained the fort you must seek it out. We will go down to the valley now. When you get to the General, lead men across the hills here, then go back by the road, and they will take the hillsmen in the rear."

"The presence has commanded, and it shall be done. We are men to take such forts as this, sahib!" responded the Ghurka proudly, and his comrades muttered assent. "Is it the wish of the presence that we descend?"

Maxwell nodded grimly and drew in his belt, for they had eaten nothing that day. A few moments later they completed the descent of the hill and stood on the road itself, the blackness of the Hilt towering above.

"There will be no guards from here to the walls," whispered Madho Rao. "Most of the men are no doubt at the front, holding back the troops."

Down the steep incline of the Hilt were scattered sangars of boulders, rough triangles of broken stone; but no sound came from these. Only from the rugged, half-built, and half-natural walls of

the fort itself came the rattle of steel on stone and the murmur of voices.

Slowly the four men crept along, seeking for an unguarded spot before the moon should rise above the hills to disclose them. Suddenly Madho Rao paused and caught Maxwell's arm, pointing up.

"See, sahib! There be guards in that tower near the gate, for there a torch burns. And there be guards yonder, in the corner tower. But between are none, and the wall is rugged. Does the presence wish that we ascend?"

"If you can," ironically answered Maxwell. The little man grinned, breathed a word to his comrades, and all three vanished. Maxwell knew that the Ghurkas were born climbers, and could creep up the face of the hills like mountain sheep; but he shook his head as he glanced up at the dark mass of rock wall. Silently the Ghurka flitted back to his side.

"If the presence will permit his servants to stand upon his shoulders," murmured Madho Rao, deferentially as ever, "there are ledges above."

For answer Maxwell walked to the foot of the rough wall, found the other two, and unhesitatingly braced himself with hands and feet. His quick eye had caught a ledge some twenty feet up the natural rock wall, and the attempt seemed hopeless.

Shoes off, the three Ghurkas climbed to the broad shoulders of their officer, one by one, until all four stood clinging like flies against the rock-face.

Maxwell groaned beneath the weight; but sud-

denly it lightened, and a second later again. Only Madho Rao was left.

Then he, too, vanished, and Maxwell stepped back with a grunt of relief. Something flapped against him, and he grasped the rope of belts strapped together that had been lowered by the first man up.

Another minute and he stood on the ledge. Above them projected another, which they gained by the same cautious method. Here they rested to regain breath, for such work is no easy task for starving men at the best of times. Still there was silence overhead, for the bare feet had made no noise on the rock, and by the searchlight the hillsmen knew that the column was still miles away.

Once more Maxwell padded his shoulders with his poshtin and braced himself. Slowly Madho Rao mounted his human ladder, but this time there came no lightening of the burden. Instead, a faint whisper drifted down to Maxwell.

"It is too high, presence. I must jump."

Maxwell shivered, and not with the cold. They had nearly gained the crest of the rock; and if Madho Rao should fail in that desperate leap upward the result was only too certain. But they had gone too far to retreat now, and he settled himself under the weight.

There came a sudden jar that ground his face and shoulders against the wall, and then relief from the strain. Maxwell shut his eyes, hardly daring to breathe as he waited. But no dull crunch came from below, and once more he stood alone on the ledge.

"Thank Heaven, the brave little beggar made it ! "

Even with the help of the men above, it was no easy task for him to climb that stretch of wall, for he was almost numb with cold and hunger. But at last he fell on his face with a panting sob, and for a space the four men lay side by side under a five-foot parapet of hewn stone.

They had climbed the rock-face at its steepest point, but where no hillsman would be suspecting danger. To right and left of them the wall deepened, between the gates and the corner tower.

"You can never return that way, Madho Rao," breathed Maxwell.

"It is child's play," laughed the other under his breath. "Child's play, sahib ! "

"Then return before the moon rises. Remember, bring men over the hills and take the tribesmen in the rear ! Most of the garrison must be down there."

"But what will the presence do ? "

"I have other work. If I can get the mem-sahib away I will overtake you on the road ; if not, don't wait for me. And now—go ! "

"Salaam, hazur ! "

One by one the brown hands shot out to his, and with a clutch in his throat Maxwell saw the three merge into the blackness. There came a slight scuffle, and he was alone.

For a little while he lay silent, listening. Once he heard a long-drawn breath from below, but at length he rose to his feet, for his work lay before him. A quick spring, and he was on the stone-built rampart, looking down into the courtyard.

To right and left there was no movement. The watch-towers on either side of the gate and on the corners, built flush with the parapet, gave no sign of life beyond a dull torch-flare.

Below, the courtyard was lit by a single sputtering torch-butt. From the long guard-house inside the gates there came the sound of voices and the glow of lamps, and across the courtyard were other buildings, much as at Khotal Digar.

"The women's quarters would be over there," he thought to himself. "Well, if I am to find Marjorie and get off before moonrise, there's no time to lose."

At his feet were steps from rampart to courtyard, and drawing his poshtin about him, he stepped forth boldly enough. But the place was not so unguarded as appeared. No sooner did he reach the courtyard and pass beneath the sputtering torch than a dark figure loomed up at his side.

"*Wah-illah!* These villagers be restless folk," chuckled a voice that stirred a vague chord in Maxwell's memory. "Can you not sleep before moonrise, brother, for fear of a knife in the throat?"

The man's face was indistinct, and Maxwell tried to place the voice. But he answered promptly. Here was a source of information, barring accidents.

"Sleep and safety are not children of the same cradle, brother. You speak most truly. What news from the fight?"

"The infidel sons of Sheitan drive us back, and our lord has ordained that the sirdars meet in *jirgah* within the hour."

"*Ma'uzbillah!* May God save us!" ejaculated Maxwell, in the pious whine of the Afghan on hearing bad news. "So, the council is to meet? Here?"

"Where else?" The other peered forward curiously. "Art new come from thy village? I do not remember such a face."

"Aye, and I love not these stone walls," returned Maxwell hastily. "The Kafir dogs should have been destroyed ere this among the hills."

"Go tell that to Petrovski sahib," laughed the other. "God be with you!"

"And with you, brother."

Maxwell wandered on, and the dark form vanished. But memory had come to him, and there was sweat on his brow as he gained the shadow of the buildings, for the man was no other than that same Mir Zada whom he had ordered to the hospital at Peshawur, and who had afterward broken his way to freedom again. Were he recognized, there would be little to hope for from this man at least.

He stared about him, wondering where to look for Marjorie. It was not his first visit to the place; but within the last few weeks new defences had been built on every side, and a single false move would lose the whole game.

Now there was a new danger, for once the *jirgah*, or council, was convened in the courtyard, escape would be hard indeed. Moreover, he was ravenous, and was hard put to it to resist the temptation to make use of the little box of opium which is the mainstay of every hillsman.

A moment later he was aware of another dark figure that stood, rifle in hand, near a small building.

"Ho, brother! For the love of Allah give me of thy opium, lest I go mad and slay this Feringee woman I am set to guard!"

Maxwell's heart leaped. Was it possible that chance had flung the game into his hands? He took the little box from his kummerbund and held it out.

"Willingly, brother. Perhaps you have some food for the starving?"

"Aye!" The guard gave a grunt of satisfaction and returned the box. With it he handed Maxwell a couple of chupattis.

"Allah bless you!" murmured the latter, as he swallowed the last morsel. "So it is here that the Kafir maid is confined, eh?"

"*Kya!* Does not all the garrison know it? Thy opium is good."

A swift glance around showed Maxwell that they were alone. Now was his chance, and without compunction he seized it. Catching the Afridi by throat and rifle-wrist, he flung him back against the wall, hoping to stun him with the blow.

But the man's puggaree was thick, and the next instant a silent, deadly struggle was in progress. Maxwell's hand compressed the sinewy brown throat in a grip of iron, yet the man's left hand was free, and steel flashed out.

There was only one course left to him. Releasing the man's right wrist, he drove his left fist up against the black beard. Holding the hillsman's head against the wall as he was, the shock was

terrific, and without a sound the man crumpled up. In another minute Maxwell had bound and gagged him with his own puggaree, and straightened up, breathing heavily.

"All quiet," he thought, looking swiftly about. "Now for it!"

Stepping to the door, he softly shot the primitive bolt, then drew the door open. The light of a lamp shone out, and with a rapid movement he was inside; that bar of light streaming across the courtyard would betray him instantly.

Standing before him in startled surprise at his sudden entrance was Marjorie Danton. The building had but one room, and after a quick glance around his eyes went to the girl's face.

It was very pale, and more beautiful than ever before, to his thinking. But there was no time for such thoughts now, and he salaamed ironically.

"We must hasten, Miss Danton. There is just a bare chance that we can slip away if we go at once."

A cry broke from the girl at his words, and she took a step forward, eyes alight with incredulous amazement.

"Why—you, Major Maxwell? Am I mad?"

"It is I, Miss Danton," he replied. Even as he did so he noted that the false—or real—Sikh's Blood still hung at her neck. "Do I look so frightful?" he added, with a smile. "But I must beg of you to hurry. Here, throw this around your shoulders, for it's cold enough outside."

She shrank back before the greasy poshtin, then laughed and obeyed him.

"But is this magic?" she broke out in wonder.

"You have not entered this place in that disguise?"

"So it seems," he laughingly assured her. "Tell me—you are unhurt?"

"Quite, thanks to Mr. Petrovski. He's been very attentive, really!"

"I'll remember that in his favour," vowed Maxwell, drawing a breath of relief. "Now, are you ready? Out with the light!"

He wondered at the manner in which this girl quietly accepted his appearance and carried out his orders. After that first outbreak of amazement she seemed as calmly confident as he himself; even in her appearance, save for the shawl about her shoulders, there was nothing to indicate that she might not have been sitting at home.

It was an astonishing thing to Maxwell. He had looked for some measure of self-reliance on her part, but for nothing like this; and there was open admiration in his eyes as the light went out and he flung open the door.

As they stepped into the courtyard Maxwell stopped abruptly. The sputtering torch had flickered out, but the doors of the long guard-house were opening and men were pouring forth. He turned quickly.

"Here—in between the houses! Say nothing and keep that coat about you!"

He quickly pushed her into the narrow space between two buildings, then stooped over the prostrate figure of the Afridi. Swiftly dragging him inside the room they had just left, he took the rifle and poshtin of the man and stepped out.

A moment later he stood on guard—watchful, immobile—as the courtyard flooded with light and men. They were too late—the *jirgah* was assembling !

There was little of the picturesque about the ruffians crowding before them. All wore the universal poshtin in varied degrees of uncleanness. More than one Maxwell recognized as a *malik*, or village headman. Here were burly Afghans, eagle-eyed Afridis, lithe Pathans—men of all tribes united in one bond of religion against the infidel. It was indeed a gathering of the “people of the book,” for syuds and mullahs were scattered among them.

Side by side, Mir Khan and the trouble-breeder strode out and seated themselves on sheepskins beneath the torches. At the same instant Maxwell, every sense on the alert, felt that eyes were upon him, and he moved farther into the shadow.

“There is no God but God, and Mohammed is His prophet,” said Mir Khan gravely. “My brothers, the infidel is coming to meet his destruction. Let us take counsel.”

A bearded malik spoke out abruptly, striding forward.

“Asylum of the Universe, it is known to many of us that your power is as the power of Allah himself. Yet the fear of the sirkar is heavy upon the villages, and the tribesmen await the issue undecided, for the word has not yet gone forth that the Sikh's Blood is in your hands. Now that you hold the Feringee woman, take the stone from her and proclaim a *jehad* [a holy war] against the infidel. Ere three days are past such thousands

will sweep in from the hills that this army the sirkar has sent against us will be dust."

"*Wah! Inshallah!* He speaks truth!" rolled out a deep murmur of assent. As Mir Khan lifted a hand for silence, Maxwell caught sight of Mir Zada slipping quietly around the edge of the group, and the man's eyes were fixed on him.

"Listen, my children!" cried Mir Khan. "Hear ye the words of Syud Hussein, the holy man, and he shall tell the true story of the Sikh's Blood. The Feringee woman wears a false stone; regard it not."

As the holy and supremely dirty Syud Hussein arose, Mir Zada took station at the side of Maxwell calmly and quietly.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW THE JIRGAH ENDED

"OH, shadow of Allah," droned out the holy man, "it is known to all men how, before the white man came hither, Ahmed Shah led the Afghans to the sack of Delhi ; and how, having crossed the Indus for the fourth time, he overthrew the city of the Sikh dogs, Amritsar, and cleansed the mosques with the blood of the infidel captives. On the hand of Ahmed Shah was the great ruby taken at Delhi, and from the great slaughter of the infidels it was named the Sikh's Blood. Afterward it was stolen by a Sikh, who led his people to victory at Sirhind and Lahore, and while he possessed it no man could stand before the infidels. Afterward it came to the Dost Mohammed Khan, Amir-i-Kabir, the great amir. Though his family, the Barakzai Sirkars, were not of the blood of Ahmed Shah, yet it is known how through virtue of the Sikh's Blood Dost Mohammed ruled the Afghans as none has ruled since his time. Then he lost the stone, and the sarkar overcame him ; regaining it, he regained his power. At his death the stone was stolen by a trader and sold to the Russians. And have they not ruled the hills? But by influence of Petrovski sahib it was sent, a present, to Mir Khan, that so he might become all-

powerful. That is the tale. There is but one God."

"And Mohammed is His prophet," added Mir Khan devoutly. "Listen, brethren. Two stones were sent, a false and a true, lest the spies of the sirkar find them. And so it came to pass, for Allah willed that the real stone should fall into the hands of the infidel."

There was an ominous silence for a moment. Maxwell felt the burning eyes of Mir Zada fixed upon him, and knew that his disguise had been penetrated.

"Yet through this Feringee woman," went on the chief confidently, "shall I possess the Sikh's Blood ere three days. I swear it on the Koran! Let this word go through the hills, and bid the men prepare their arms, for the owner of the Sikh's Blood is lord of the hills, and——"

"And among us is a Feringee, whom may God roast!" interrupted the voice of the man beside Maxwell. "See, here is Maxwell sahib!"

Amid a silence that spoke more than words, every eye was turned on the speaker, and Maxwell quietly stepped forward into the circle of light.

"Come, Miss Danton," he said quietly in English. As the girl stepped forward a murmur passed around. Mir Khan stared aghast, while Serge Petrovski smiled slightly.

Maxwell knew that he had but one chance—an appeal to the courage-loving hillsmen, and he took it for the sake of Marjorie Danton. Had she not been at his side the rifle in his hand would have served him for tongue.

"Ye have good eyes, men of the hills; yet has

the sirkar eyes also. See, I slipped out of your hands at Khotal Digar, and now I have come among you where you thought no man knew the way. Fools ! How shall ye fight against me when the Sikh's Blood is mine? I only know where it is ; go tell that to your tribesmen ! In the dwelling yonder seek your guard, whom I left bound in his own puggaree. With his life have I bought the life of this Feringee woman. See to it that she receives no harm, for me ye cannot hurt."

A mutter of admiration passed around the chiefs, and Maxwell knew that he had struck the right chord. At a sign from Petrovski two men entered the building and dragged out the still senseless guard. When he was found to be unwounded, and as dead, the mutter swelled again.

"Lead him back with the woman," ordered Mir Khan calmly, rising to his feet. "Maxwell sahib, it seems to me that the blessing of Allah is upon us. Presently I will send for you. Go !"

Maxwell threw down his rifle and turned, leading Marjorie into the room. The guards lit their lamp from a torch and left them ; as the door slammed to a confused babel of voices rose from without, amid which that of Mir Zada rose keen and shrill.

"Crucify the Kafir dog ! Crucify him before his own men to-morrow !"

But he forgot this a moment later, for Marjorie Danton, very pale and very quiet, turned to him with outstretched hand.

"Major Maxwell, I wish to ask your pardon for—for many things. Too late I see that I misjudged you very cruelly back there in Peshawur

—oh, it seems like some horrible dream that will pass with the daylight! I am very sorry for the things I said and did.”

“My dear Miss Danton,” smiled Maxwell, a song rising in his heart, “you make me very happy, indeed. I did not blame you in the least, for I could not explain to you then. Now let us forget all that, please. Tell me, where is that packet I gave you when I left?”

The clear eyes lifted to his with a smile. “I have it, Major Maxwell. It has not left me, and when they captured me there in the pass it was hanging about my neck. Do you want it now?”

“God forbid!” returned Maxwell fervently, and smiled. “That ruby pendant about your neck is the false Sikh’s Blood, and the real one is in the packet. So you see, it must not be found upon me, and they will not suspect you. Now, do you begin to realize how the game is played, and why I stole a ruby in Kabul?”

“Yes,” she replied simply. “I realized it all as soon as I saw you in this disguise. But what is the Sikh’s Blood?”

Remembering that the girl knew no Pushtu, and had not understood the words of Syud Hussein, Maxwell repeated the story of the holy man.

“And do you mean to say that this wonderful stone has been in my keeping all the time?” broke out Marjorie as he finished. .

“More than that, my dear girl; the peace of the Indian Empire has been in your keeping,” returned Maxwell gravely. A little flush crept into her pale features, but she met his intent gaze bravely and steadily. “Once Mir Khan gets his

hands on that ruby, not a tribe in the hills but will join him ; half Afghanistan will flock to him, and the amir would be powerless to prevent it after a holy war had been proclaimed by every mullah from Chitral to Herat."

"It is a great trust—a great responsibility," she said slowly. "It makes me afraid, Major Maxwell ; and yet it makes me very glad. I have been brought up in England, where every one has told me of my father and what he has done, until it has seemed a terrible thing to be a mere woman, unable to do anything for her country. Yes, I am very glad, I think."

"A mere woman?" smiled Maxwell, his grave face softening strangely. "It is such 'mere women' as you who provide inspiration and faith for the men who are at the front ; it is such mere women as you who give them a country to fight for, and who steel them to the battle when everything seems lost."

Perhaps he spoke with more warmth than he had intended, for slowly a dark red crept into the cheeks of the girl, and she did not answer. A moment later Maxwell passed on and the slight tension vanished.

"But about this ruby. I am not so sure that the real Sikh's Blood is in the packet, after all." He told her why the two stones had been sent through different channels, and of how there had been some mistake in the sending.

"The stone I obtained was in a pendant, as was that given you by Mir Khan. Both are rubies, and both were intended to deceive the keenest eye. Aside from the difference in the

setting, there must have been some other in the stone itself ; what it could have been I do not know, and we dare not compare them now. Petrovski has not examined that which you wear? ”

“ No, though he smiled slightly when he first saw it, as did many of these men. Do you think it possible that it could be the real stone, after all? ”

“ Hardly,” replied Maxwell thoughtfully. “ Petrovski refused to believe me when I said that the other had come in pendant form ; no doubt he is confident that I was trying to deceive him. Probably he and Mir Khan made no close examination of the one they received, seeing that it was a pendant. Mir Khan could not have had it more than a day or two before he gave it to you in a fit of childishness that has cost him dear.”

“ Why,” she smiled with a trace of archness, “ is it so childish, then, to make me a present? ”

“ For a native, even though a Khan, yes. But when I am sent for, as I will be in a few moments, you might examine the two stones. Perhaps you can tell which is which ; but, good Lord ! ”—he interrupted himself contritely—“ I forgot to tell you the good news ! Your father is leading a column, and he is only a few miles away. By morning the force will be at the gates.”

“ What ! And is he well? My mother—— ”

“ It was a terrible shock, Miss Danton ; but they are hoping for the best. Within a few days, let us trust, you will be back home again ; so brace up—and I need not tell you to be brave.”

"Thanks for so much," she smiled. "And you—what will they do with you?"

"They can do little, Miss Danton," he lied cheerfully. "Hold me prisoner probably. So don't worry about me. They will separate us, but some of the Ghurkas came with me as far as the gates and are guiding the column forward now, so we can hope for a speedy rescue. Even had we got away to-night we might not have reached the troops; things are for the best, perhaps."

With the words the door behind him opened and the trouble-breeder entered, with a slight bow to Marjorie.

"Come, Major. We have much to talk over."

Maxwell nodded and held out a hand to Marjorie. For a moment they stood wordless, finding each other's eyes, then Maxwell turned and followed his enemy from the doorway. He cared little what came now, for the weight that had lain on his soul was gone.

So joyful was his bearing, so clear and confident was his keen face, that as he came beneath the torchlight a murmur of amazement ran about through the sirdars.

"*Wah!* Is this Kafir in love with Azrael, that he comes smiling to death?"

There was no trace of recognition on the scowling faces as he entered the circle, though to nearly all of them Maxwell was known personally. Mir Zada, the Pathan, was grinning in delight, but the grin became sickly and vanished when Maxwell looked into his eyes in passing.

"Crucify the dog," growled Mir Zada, "even as his master, Hazrat 'Esa!"

Maxwell stood silently before Mir Khan. The stalwart, erect figure of the prisoner was well set off by his Pathan dress, and for an instant Maxwell and the Afghan gazed at each other, then the Englishmen's look went to Petrovski.

"'Twelve men can sleep beneath the robe of a dervish,'" he quoted the old proverb quizzically; "'but two kings cannot dwell in the same city.' Which is king here?"

"I am king and Petrovski sahib is my guest," responded Mir Khan proudly. "Now, Maxwell sahib, we are come to a reckoning, even as I prophesied that day at Peshawur. You heard the tale of the ruby?"

"I heard it, Mir Khan. What will Russian guns avail you when the sirkar holds the Sikh's Blood?"

"The sirkar is as a jackal filled with poison," retorted the chief, "whom any dog can sweep away. As for the ruby, you murdered the messenger and took it at Kabul; but it has not yet reached Simla. That much my ears have heard for certain."

"I did not murder your trader. I slew him in fair fight, Mir Khan, as that man whom you loosed from his bonds had been slain had I struck harder. As for the ruby, none save I know where that is, and—I tell not."

There was silence about the circle of bearded faces, and Petrovski dropped on his sheepskin, smiling softly to himself. Mir Zada raised an insistent cry for crucifixion, at which a mullah

promptly shut him up. The mutter of firing had died away by this time, and Maxwell wondered vainly as to the safety of Madho Rao.

If the Ghurka got through and led around a force to take the garrison in the rear, there was a chance that the Tulwar's Hilt might be emptied of its men at one stroke.

"We want the Sikh's Blood, Maxwell!" snapped the clear voice of the trouble-breeder. "You know why, and you know for what. If it is in Peshawur, a heliograph will take the news to my agents there; but we must have the stone at once. Perchance it is on your person?"

Maxwell shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"That might be. But you will never get the Sikh's Blood into your hands again."

"Search him!"

As Petrovski gave the curt order Maxwell saw Mir Khan's face darken. The hill chief was treacherous enough in his way, but he was not trained to crafty dissimulation, and it was evident that the Russian's usurpation of authority angered him.

"Which is king here, you or Mir Khan?" smiled Maxwell, hoping to pour oil on the fire as two men advanced to obey the order. Instantly the chieftain was on his feet.

"I am king here, Maxwell sahib! Search him, men. Remember, Petrovski sahib, that you have interfered with my wishes once, and I like not to be interfered with."

As the men began a methodical search Maxwell saw Petrovski dart a single furious glance at the chief.

"Have a care, brother! In my own land I am a sirdar—aye, and a Khan to boot. I am playing your game for you, and better than you, and these are my captives, not yours."

It was the first and only time that Maxwell ever heard an allusion to Petrovski's real self. That the man was no ordinary Russian was plain, else he had never gained such a gift for Mir Khan as the Sikh's Blood.

The words had their effect upon the hill chief, however. With a visible effort that brought blood from his lips Mir Khan repressed the hot words on his tongue and resumed his seat. But more than one angry look was darted at the Russian, and Maxwell rejoiced as he saw that Petrovski had plainly been carrying affairs with a high hand and had done himself no good thereby.

The men finished their search amid silence. It was a weird scene, there in the courtyard beneath the flaring torches. Maxwell stood, half stripped of his Pathan garb, while the trouble-breeder and his allies watched every motion of the searchers, until at last the latter finished their task and stood up.

"There is nothing, sahib."

Petrovski nodded, frowning. A mutter came out of the distance once more, and the hill-men nervously began fingering their weapons, for they itched to be at the front and to earn paradise by killing at least one Feringee.

"Send to the General sahib," suggested Mir Khan, "and offer to return his daughter if the Sikh's Blood be given up—though to tell truth I would that she sat in my zenana!"

Maxwell, smiling scornfully at these words, caught a single wrathful glint in the eye of Petrovski ; but the other echoed his smile.

"Not even the General sahib, or the *lat sahib*, or the *burra lat sahib* [the Viceroy] would know aught of that gem, Mir Khan," answered the Russian. "These Feringee do not trust such things among themselves. No, Maxwell sahib said that he alone knew where lay the stone, and he spoke truth."

"Then we have no time to lose in idle speech," and Mir Khan rose swiftly to his feet. "It is a pity, Maxwell sahib, for you are a brave man, yet you must be made to tell this thing, and quickly. Make fire in a brazier there, strip this Feringee to the waist, and fetch out the brazier when the irons are hot."

"Give me the irons," volunteered Mir Zada exultantly. "This Kafir would have let my blood and that of my family down in Peshawur ; now the rifle is in the hands of its owner, Maxwell sahib !"

Maxwell, stripped to the waist, and with his hands bound behind him, faced the ordeal calmly, and when his shoulders were uncovered called aloud to one of the sirdars, a malik whom he knew of old.

"Ho, Afzul Jah ! Dost remember that bullet wound in my shoulder? "

"*Wah-illah !* It was from my own rifle, and that day thou didst slay four of my men ! " came the admiring response. "Tell what thou knowest that so I may yet meet thee sword in hand instead of throwing thy bones to the dogs ! "

Maxwell only smiled in reply. He looked about for the trouble-breeder, but the Russian had vanished, doubtless having some compunction about watching the scene of torture. Mir Zada now began pouring into his ears a vindictive description of what was about to take place, but, strangely enough, Maxwell felt no fear of the torture.

It was as if he had been taken up above such things ; that brief interview with Marjorie Danton had shown him that success was won where he most expected failure.

The Sikh's Blood was safe in the midst of the enemy ; there was trouble brewing between Mir Khan and Petrovski, who had no doubt protected Marjorie ; the column was at hand to rescue her, and, best of all—she understood !

“Thou fool !” he smiled at the man beside him. “How can fear come to him who is above fear? Peace !”

Mir Zada obeyed sullenly at a sign from Mir Khan. A moment later two men appeared, bearing between them a glowing charcoal brazier in which lay irons. As they did so, however, Mir Zada leaped to his feet and approached Mir Khan, speaking in a low voice.

“By the beard of Mohammed, it is good !” exclaimed the chieftain, whirling about. “Shere Ali ! Afzul Jah ! Lead out the Feringee woman !”

With a sudden deep fear in his heart Maxwell saw the two men leave the circle. A moment afterward Marjorie Danton appeared, and as she saw him and the glowing brazier her face went white.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TROUBLE-BREEDER WINS

BEFORE a word could be spoken, however, the trouble-breeder strode into the circle of men and addressed Mir Khan rapidly.

“ Brother, has it occurred to you that our men out yonder might stand in grave danger? ”

“ What mean you? ” demanded the startled chieftain.

“ Maxwell sahib came—how? Across the hills of a certainty. Nor is it likely that he came alone. What, then, of the others? Is it not likely that they have gone back to lead men over the hills and fall upon our comrades in the rear? ”

“ *Wah!* ” The exclamation broke from a score of throats. Instantly Mir Khan stilled the rising clamour and sent off two men with orders that those holding the column in check should retire into the fortress. Petrovski turned, and his face darkened at sight of the girl.

“ I commanded that this woman be left in peace. Why has she been brought here? ”

“ At my command, Petrovski sahib ! ” answered Mir Khan, anger and injured pride in his voice.

“ Maxwell sahib has dared much to rescue her, and it is not unlikely that he loves her. Therefore would she not share his secret? Can a Kafir

withhold anything from the woman he loves? *Wah!* They are fools in such case, even to Maxwell sahib! Let her look upon his torture and speak!"

Maxwell felt thankful in that moment that Marjorie, standing calmly by his side, could not understand what was being said. For a little the three men looked darkly at each other, mutual distrust plain in their faces.

Suddenly the secret of it all flashed over Maxwell, staggering him. Mir Khan was playing a double game with Petrovski; the Russian was defending Marjorie evidently from the chieftain, and the latter was playing with him until the present danger had been overcome.

Maxwell remembered the glances that Sirdar Fath had cast at the girl back in Peshawur at the General's bungalow; he remembered the fire in the man's eyes—the same fire that had shone in those of Mir Khan himself.

Beyond a doubt the two were playing a subtle game with each other for the possession of Marjorie!

"Listen!" he broke out anxiously. "Petrovski, I swear by all I hold sacred that if you send this girl out to her father now, and unharmed, the Sikh's Blood shall be in your hands before to-morrow night!"

A murmur of eagerness went up from the sirdars crowding around. The trouble-breeder looked at Maxwell, then at Marjorie, and with the look Maxwell knew that he had guessed aright. Finally the Russian spoke slowly, torn between desire and duty.

"If the offer be made in good faith, Major, I will accept——"

"I will not!" broke in Mir Khan, the torrent of his fury sweeping away all restraint. "This woman was taken by my men, and she belongs to me! When I saw her in the city yonder I swore to have her, and I have kept the oath. "Listen, Petrovski sahib! It is the deed of a fool to give away what is clenched in the fist—nor will I. Let the Kafir be tortured, or let the woman speak. We will gain the ruby without losing our grip on either."

Petrovski stood silent, a murderous rage in his eyes. But he was far more subtle than the hill-man. For a moment Maxwell saw the corded sinews in his neck stand forth beneath the man's effort at self-control, then he turned to Mir Khan with a smile.

"This is no time for dispute, brother, when the enemy is at our gates. Let it be as you say, for you are Khan here, and I am but a guest. Now, instead of torturing the man, let us torture the woman. So shall the man be forced to speak, for he is no child to fear the sight of weapons, yet these Feringee cannot bear to see their women *log* in pain. Dost hear, Major Maxwell?"

Maxwell heard, and knew that the man had guessed well. Sooner than see Marjorie Danton hurt he would have surrendered the Sikh's Blood a thousandfold; but if Mir Khan loved her he would not consent to this torture. Maxwell was soon to find out his mistake, for he had forgotten that the love of the hills is not the love of the

plains, nor is the love of the Afghan the love of the Feringee.

"You devil!" he said with passionless, level voice. "You would not dare such a thing, and you know it well!"

"But I dare!" cried Mir Khan quickly. "Mir Zada, touch the irons to the Kafir woman; but on your life do not spoil her beauty!"

"Nay—stop!" The anguished cry broke from Maxwell as Mir Zada plucked a glowing iron from the brazier and turned toward the girl with a fiendish delight in his eyes. Marjorie was still looking calmly at Mir Khan, but at Maxwell's sudden cry she saw Mir Zada and understood something of what was meant. "Stop!" cried Maxwell, writhing in his bonds. "You shall have the stone, Mir Khan!"

Mir Zada was halted abruptly. Marjorie guessed the import of Maxwell's words, and turned to him with a half-pleading, half-dignified gesture.

"Major Maxwell! I don't know what these wretches are saying, or whether they are threatening you or me; but—be strong! Don't give in to them, whatever it is."

"Too late!" groaned Maxwell hoarsely. "Your friend Petrovski—Sirdar Fath—the trouble-breeder—suggested that they torture *you*. Give them the packet with my ruby, and have done."

"So—she has it!"

The eager, swift cry broke from Petrovski, but Marjorie paid no attention to him. One hand went to her breast as her eyes rested on Maxwell's face, but her voice was calm.

"I do not think you mean that! Let them torture if they dare, and my father will exact a heavy penalty; but——"

"Miss Danton," broke in Petrovski, stepping forward with a gesture toward Mir Khan and his chiefs, "I beg of you not to refuse this. I have done my best to shield you, but even my protection has its limits. It is known that you have the stone, and it will avail nothing to refuse surrendering it—for there are no women here to search you, and these men will stop at nothing."

A single flash of fear crossed her face as she comprehended the words, then her eyes met the anxious gaze of Maxwell, and with a little sob she gave in. One hand went to her throat, where the false ruby blazed in the torchlight, and she pulled out the little flat packet, snapping the cord that held it.

"I have promised to give this into the hands of Major Maxwell and none other," she said quietly. "Unbind him."

Petrovski drew a knife and cut Maxwell's bonds. The hillsmen leaned forward in tense watchfulness as the girl silently handed over the little packet and turned away. Mir Khan motioned, and the two men who had brought her out led her back to her room.

For the first time Maxwell remembered that there were papers with the ruby—papers which must not fall into alien hands at any cost. He tore away the folds of the packet, and without a word held out the blood-red stone to Mir Khan, who sprang forward to take it.

As one deep gasp went up from every throat

Maxwell thrust the papers into the flame of the torch over his head.

Petrovski leaped forward ; but too late. No others had observed the action, for every eye was fastened on the Sikh's Blood, at which Mir Khan was gazing as if fascinated. Maxwell folded his arms and smiled ironically at his enemy.

"That much is saved, at any rate," he said, and the other turned away with a shrug.

Slowly Mir Khan raised the stone, holding it up to the torchlight, and it seemed as if a blotch of frozen blood glittered in his fingers. Then his voice rang out—deep, exultant, fired with the religious fervour of the hillsman in his hour of triumph.

"There is but one God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God ! Now will the true believers, the people of the book, indeed triumph over the Kafirs who follow Hazrat 'Esa ! I, Mir Khan, Zahir-u-din, defender of the faith—I hold the Sikh's Blood, and from this hour do I rule the hills ! *Allahu Akbar !* "

"*Allahu Akbar !* Allah is great !" stormed out the shout in chorus, the battle-shout that boded ill for India since the days of the image-breaker.

The trouble-breeder's thin lips were curved in a slight smile of scorn as he stood apart and watched, for he had played with these fierce child-minds as a potter plays with his clay, and knew that the stimulus of a legend could move them to deeds of which they were incapable otherwise.

"Let there be a jihad proclaimed through every tribe of the hills !" thundered Mir Khan. "Let mullah and syud-jee bear word that the Sikh's

Blood is in the Tulwar's Hilt at last ! Syud Hossein, take word of this to Kabul, and bid the Afghans come to us, that we may sweep the sirkar from our midst, even unto Delhi, and hold the kingdom of our fathers ! Cry the holy war of Islam—and no quarter to the infidel ! ”

Suddenly Mir Khan became the hillsman once more and stilled the yells of fanaticism that shrilled wildly up into the night.

Choosing half a dozen messengers, one by one they kissed the gem and departed with the news, while others went out to meet the recalled garrison. As he finished Maxwell saw Mir Zada stride forward and pluck at the arm of the chief, and a swift foreboding came upon him, for the bitter hatred that this man bore him had been shown only too clearly.

“ Oh, Zahir-u-din, defender of the faith ”—Mir Zada cunningly gave the chief the title he had assumed—“ is it not commanded by the Prophet that the infidel dogs be destroyed utterly ? ”

“ So it shall be done,” responded the chief sternly. “ Why ask foolish questions ? ”

“ For this reason, shadow of Allah : this Maxwell sahib is my enemy and an unbeliever. It was I who penetrated his disguise ; it was I who gained for thee the Sikh's Blood ; it was I who whispered of torture into his ear until he howled aloud like a dog beneath the lash. Shall I gain no reward for this ? Obey the command of the Prophet, Zahir-u-din ! Give me the blood of my enemy ; crucify him between the gates, that his own people may know the fate awaiting them ! Crucify him ! ”

"Crucify him ! God is great, and His Prophet has commanded ! Crucify ! "

As the savage yell went up Maxwell knew that there was little hope for him. Mir Khan swung around, every trace of his assumed chivalry vanished before the absolute fanaticism that gripped him, and his snarling face mirrored the thirst for blood that underlay every attribute of the hillsman.

"*Inshallah!* Let the command of Mohammed be obeyed ! At dawn this pig shall be crucified before the gates, and at sunset thou, Mir Zada, shalt flay the life from him in the face of his own people ! Let it be—— "

To the utter amazement of Maxwell, the trouble-breeder stepped in front of him and faced Mir Khan with uplifted hand. The steel-like jaw of the Russian was set hard, and his hawk face met that of Mir Khan with a silent fury that stilled the words upon the lips of the chieftain.

"Peace ! Mir Khan, and you, brethren of the hills, it is known to you how for these many years I have worked in secret against the sirkar, how I have suffered and fought and aided you, how I have gained guns and rifles and powder for you, how I have promised you that when you rise against the sirkar men shall come to your aid by the thousands from across the hills. This man, Maxwell sahib, was my enemy ere Mir Zada set eyes upon him, and I claim him first ! "

For an instant there was silence. Then Mir Zada thrust forward, his kukri flashing in his hand.

"Are we jackals to scatter at thy bidding and

leave thee the prey, O infidel?" he howled furiously.

For answer the trouble-breeder held out his hand, and the light flashed on an automatic that covered the tribesman.

"Put away the knife—quickly!" rang out the cold, impassive voice. Mir Zada hesitated, then, with a sullen curse, thrust the kukri into his waist-band. Petrovski flung one defiant, insolent look about the scowling faces, then turned to Mir Khan, who was fingering his tulwar threateningly.

"Guardian of the faith," he said ironically, "there was a day when you did not scorn the aid of Russia, but begged for it humbly. Was it not given freely? Was not the Sikh's Blood sent to you from afar? Did I not build this fortress for you, and give you the means to defend it? Now say—am I worth more to you than this Mir Zada, this spawn who dares to face me with a knife?"

Mir Khan nodded sullenly, but Petrovski waited for him to speak; and at last he did so, his will yielding to the other and stronger one.

"It is truth, Petrovski sahib. What is thy will?"

"I would have speech with him," and the trouble-breeder thrust his weapon back into the folds of his kummerbund, for he was in Afghan dress, as always. "There is much work yet before us this night, and ere the dawn the Feringees will be upon us; so for the present let Maxwell sahib be confined in one of the towers above the wall of the gates. It may be that the bullets of his own people will find

him out, and if not, there may yet be work for this Mir Zada. This Feringee knows many secrets, Khan sahib, and they will be of value to us both can we but extract them from him."

Mir Khan glared at Maxwell and Petrovski together, but the last cunning words had clearly influenced him. As to Maxwell, he was in blank wonder. It never crossed his mind that the trouble-breeder held a merciful thought in his heart, and yet the other must have known the futility of attempting to extract any secret of the border from his opponent.

Each man knew the calibre of the other, each had hunted the other vainly, each knew that the other possessed that indomitable will of iron that breaks but never bends.

What, then, was Petrovski's thought? However, he awaited his fate calmly, for, whatever came, he knew that he was at one with Marjorie Danton, though no word of love had ever passed between them; and, above all, if he must die he would die, as other men had died before him, without a whimper.

The tension was lifted for the moment by a shout from the gates, and into the courtyard ran a panting, exhausted man, who gasped out his greeting and message.

"O light of victory! Sirdar Jung bids me say that the word to retire to the fort has come safely, and he is even now leading back our forces. The Feringee has been too strong for us, Khan Sahib, though we have slain many men this day and night."

"Aye, for the sarkar held the Sikh's Blood," said Mir Khan confidently. "Now that we hold it, the tide will turn. Within three days the hill tribes will be upon the Feringee dogs, for the Sikh's Blood is in my hand, and while I hold it no man can prevail against me."

He turned to the trouble-breeder, once more his usual suave self.

"Petrovski sahib, work thy will upon this prisoner, for I give him to thee. As for the other, remember that hereafter she is mine. When the troops of the *lat sahib* have been destroyed in the valley, she shall enter my zenana and there forget her griefs. Moreover, it is fitting that the Feringee should give me a bride, since my other wives are in their hands! And presume not to harm this kafir, Mir Zada, save at the command of Petrovski sahib, or there may be a crucifixion and a flaying that you had not looked for."

Once more the knotted cords stood out on the trouble-breeder's neck, and once more he forced himself to self-restraint and smiling acquiescence.

"Thanks, brother. Men, take this sahib to the tower on the right of the gates and give him food and drink. First put his clothes upon him. Let the guards take post on the wall beneath the tower, and see to it that he is well guarded. Now, Mir Khan, let there be no more dissension between us—at least, for the present. We need all our strength to overcome the foe beyond our walls, and I see not how we can well fail."

Maxwell smiled to himself at these last words, as he got into his clothes and folded the puggaree

about his head with whip-like strokes. Every man in that column would be athirst for vengeance, not knowing that Marjorie was yet safe ; and not all the strength of the Tulwar's Hilt and the wild fervour of the fanatics within its walls would be able to restrain the Ghurkas, to say nothing of the white troops.

After he had been led into the little room in the tower, however, his confidence died away into a bitter sense of failure—the same bitterness that had lain so heavily upon him in these last weeks. He had made mistakes that a child should have avoided with his knowledge of the hillsmen.

Whether the trouble-breeder tortured him for his secrets or not mattered little. Petrovski had triumphed absolutely, and all the work of years was destroyed when the Sikh's Blood lay in the hand of Mir Khan.

Maxwell pictured the result to himself with a groan as he lay there on his narrow charpoy. Even though the Tulwar's Hilt should be taken, which would be no easy feat, the wild tribesmen of the hills would rally about the green standard, and before the troops could win back to Peshawur every pass, every defile, every rock through all the hills would spit bullets at them until they perished, as a far greater army had once perished in the pass.

Try as he would, he could see no gleam of hope. The Tulwar's Hilt could be defended for weeks, and the hill tribes would be up within days, for the word had gone forth far and near. And in the meantime—

"God ! Save her from that !" he muttered at the last. "If Mir Khan takes her to his zenana I'll murder him with my bare hands !"

And with this vow upon his lips exhaustion came upon him mercifully, and he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

A TALK WITH PETROVSKI

ALL that long day had come the flash and smoke of the mountain batteries from the ridges fronting the Hilt, and all day long Maxwell had stared out from the window in his prison-tower, a wild exultation thrilling through every nerve as he watched the steep approach below, with the tent-dotted valley beyond.

The trouble-breeder was a born general, and he had overlooked only one thing—the mad thirst for vengeance firing every man beneath the flag of the sirkar.

The triangular sangars that dotted the steep slope, reinforced by trenches and covered by the fire of the fortress above, had seemed impregnable at first sight ; but behind the Sikhs lay centuries of religious and racial hatred, and behind the Lancers and the Guides and the Fusiliers and the rest lay the thought of their grey-haired General, whose daughter was somewhere in the pile of masonry above.

“By Jove !” thought Maxwell suddenly, as the sun sank behind the western hills. “That must have been why the place isn’t riddled with shell now !”

For during the first day’s fighting hardly a shot

had entered the Hilt or struck its white walls. General Danton had evidently laid out a swift, decisive plan of operations, and weary as the troops must have been after their forced march, they had behaved superbly.

While the Sikhs and Fusiliers held the enemy in front, the Guides and a Dogra regiment had worked around the Hilt on one side, the Ghurkas and cavalry on the other.

Before noon the fortalice had been completely invested, and the guns began to trail out into position, no attention being paid to the galling fire from the Hilt and the sangars on the one approach to the gates.

Then, when all was ready, General Danton struck with the sureness of fate. From every gun on the ridges around a tremendous fire burst on the sangars and trenches, shell and shrapnel hailed death upon that steep approach, and the guns planted behind sangar and shield were silenced instantly. Then had come silence, followed by a single yell of fury.

"Wah! Guru!"

The Sikhs were loosed. Never replying to the fire that broke upon them from hillside and walls, they brought cold steel to the sangars, cleared the trenches with the bayonet, and a bare remnant of the hillsmen regained their stronghold after that terrible charge, while poshtin and puggaree dotted the approach to the gates. The Sikhs had taken vengeance.

None the less, it had been impossible to hold the ascent beneath the fire from the Hilt, and the troops had been withdrawn. The hillsmen, shaken

in confidence and amazed at the swift, savage manner in which their defences had been cleared, had seemingly forgotten their prisoner; but Maxwell cared not for food that day.

"The old General is teaching these fellows a lesson they'll not forget," he muttered as he watched the rush of the Sikhs. "The place is surrounded, and the work of a week was done in an hour. Lord! I never thought the Sikhs could do it! The Gordons themselves might well be proud of such a thing!"

Meantime the hostile hillsmen who had occupied the ridges around the fort had evidently been furnishing trouble. Although Maxwell could see nothing but the steep ascent to the gates, with the winding valley beyond, the crackling of musketry and the crash of volleys mingled with the sputter of the Maxims carried to him, and he guessed that the Ghurkas and Guides were clearing the way as they went.

So the long day had worn to its close, and at sunset the Tulwar's Hilt had been broken from its blade of valley road by tent and trench and battery, and was wound in a mesh of sparkling camp-fires, while as the night came on the search-light began to flash here and there.

"And now for a concentrated fire that will knock the place about our ears to-morrow," thought Maxwell grimly, as a scowling Pathan entered with a dish of pulao and a lamp. "I don't suppose they'd dare do anything else, although the General must be in tortures. Gad! What a splendid old chap he is!"

Had it been an ordinary hill fort, with only

jezails to sweep the approach, he would have looked to see a storming party and a charge of dynamite at the gate.

But Maxims and rapid-fire three-pounders covered that steep approach, and such a thing would be madness. Then he remembered the way he had entered. Could the Ghurkas do it again—could they climb to the gates and lay a charge?

Even as this chance occurred to him a heavy step sounded on the stairs without, and the door opened to admit the trouble-breeder. If Petrovski was worried over his initial failure to hold the sangars he did not show it, though more than once that afternoon had Maxwell heard his angry, biting voice scourging and lashing the hillsmen from the gates.

The visitor murmured ironical greeting in the formal Afghan fashion.

"May you rest in the sanctity of God, safe from all accident and misfortune of this world!"

Smiling, Maxwell repeated the words.

"You honour my humble threshold, Petrovski sahib," he continued. "Will you be seated?"

The other motioned to the guard to be gone, shut the door, and accepted the invitation of his captive. When he spoke again it was in English.

"My errand will hardly bear publicity, Maxwell. Do you know, I am beginning to put some faith in that legend of the Sikh's Blood. There are stranger things in this land than either you or I know."

"True enough!" laughed Maxwell. "But to-day has not shown that the stone has worked great wonders in your behalf!"

"That is exactly my reason. Now, out with it! Where is the real stone?"

Openly amazed at the question, Maxwell stared at his visitor for a moment.

"The real stone? Why, Mir Khan has it, of course! What do you mean?"

Petrovski waved his hand impatiently, searching Maxwell's face intently.

"By the gods, I believe that you are telling the truth! It seems that we both must be in the same boat, my friend. The real Sikh's Blood had a very slight flaw in one end, but Mir Khan's stone is perfect. He himself did not know of the flaw, for he had never seen the real stone; but others knew of it, and sooner or later there will be trouble. I dare not tell even him of his mistake."

This was a new expression for the man to use, and Maxwell felt an insane impulse to laugh. So Petrovski had lost, after all! Where, then, was the Sikh's Blood? The thought sobered him, for he knew that things were at a crisis. Instantly he determined to speak freely.

"So that is it! Tell me, did you examine the ruby that was given Miss Danton?"

"No!" The trouble-breeder started, his eyes anxious. "It came in a pendant and we expected an amulet, so paid it no attention. Do you mean——"

"It must be so," nodded Maxwell.

For a moment they were silent, and in that moment Maxwell read the secret hidden in the eyes of the other man. Then the trouble-breeder flung his secrecy to the winds.

"You have won, Major," he said quietly, his face set and hard. "When I came to Peshawur and saw that girl, I knew that she was the one predestined. Oh, I was there more than you know! I came time and again merely to look upon her face; I even dreamed of coming openly in my own shape, and—but no matter. It was folly to think of her, and I was a fool—a blind fool. When Mir Khan vowed to possess her I came near killing him. I've done my best to win the game, Maxwell, but I'm not hound enough to sacrifice a girl to that devil. God! The thought of it is maddening!"

Maxwell heard this astounding speech with his usual emotionless expression, but under the surface he was thinking hard and fast.

More startling even than Petrovski's admission of defeat was the admission of his feelings for Marjorie Danton; that the trouble-breeder would play the game to the end as desperately as he had played it in the past was certain.

But the other went on, slowly, dispassionately, as if not speaking of his own volition.

"You spoke too quickly last night. I would have shot that dog if he had dared to touch her with those irons. But I had to have that ruby, Maxwell, and I knew you'd speak. Here's an odd thing!" His hawk-face flashed into a smile. "If she has the real ruby on that pendant, then the legend has spoken truth—for, by the Lord, she is the ruler of us three men and of the hills! Mir Khan would lose paradise to win her, and has sworn to flay the man alive who touches her; and as for you——"

"What I am I am," broke in Maxwell coldly, not yet quite sure of his footing with this man whom he had fought for years. Petrovski looked at him a moment, then laughed.

"God pity you, Maxwell, for you are an Englishman ! But I am a Slav—and God pity me for it ! A word to Mir Khan and the game would be won, but I am not the man to say that word. I have worked half my life to stand where I stand to-day, to have you in my hand and your troops under my guns ; but I give you my sacred word that if I could get Marjorie Danton out of this hell-hole I'd throw the whole thing to the dogs ! "

There was no mistaking the terrible earnestness of the man, and it brought the other to his feet with outstretched hand.

"Serge Petrovski, I've fought you for a dozen years, I've set a price on your head, I've seen you murder my men as I've murdered yours—but by gad, sir, you're a man ! "

For the first time Maxwell saw a faint quiver shake that fierce hawk-face as Petrovski gripped his hand hard. The words had broken from him involuntarily, but he did not regret them as he gazed into the dark eyes and heard the words that followed.

"We're together in this thing, Maxwell. I want that ruby still, and there's no reason why I shouldn't have it now ; but first we'll get that girl out of here—eh? "

"I hope so," returned Maxwell soberly enough. It was the real Petrovski who had spoken—Petrovski the man, not the trouble-breeder ; and he was quick to appreciate the fact at its true value.

"Have you any notion of how we can do it—or how you can do it, rather? Mir Khan seems to have come out flat-footed in the matter of his future intentions."

Petrovski laughed curtly. "I must save the game for myself, if that be possible, remember. If it is not possible—then I will save the woman for you. Ah, wait!" he added, as Maxwell's face clouded. "Don't let your English reserve block the way, Maxwell, at this point. I saw that girl's face as she looked at you last night—and I know. Now, she is safe for the present, that I can answer for confidently, and when matters come to a head between me and Mir Khan, I think I can bullyrag him into giving her up."

Maxwell was not so sure of this, but it was with renewed hope that he bade the other farewell, and heard him descend the stone stairs to the courtyard. With the trouble-breeder on his side, success was more probable.

It would matter little now whether or not Mir Khan secured the real stone. With the column at the gates of the Tulwar's Hilt, with the Sikhs and Ghurkas and Beluchis in the heart of the hill country, and open war forward, his part of the game was ended.

Although the word had already gone out that Mir Khan possessed the Sikh's Blood, Maxwell believed that cold facts would outweigh religious enthusiasm with the hill tribes.

They would wait, and if the sirkar promised to capture the place there would be no rising; but at the first trifling success of Mir Khan they would be on the column like a whirlwind.

He knew them well, these hillsmen, and he knew his own comrades well, and had little fear of the outcome of that waiting. And with this thought he fell asleep.

How late he slept he did not know. He was aroused by the entrance of two men with torches, who roughly wakened him and bound his hands.

"Our lord wishes you," was the only answer to his questions.

One of the men lit the lamp from his torch, and they made a quick but careful search of the loopholed room and of Maxwell himself, evidently to make sure that he had secreted no weapon. Before they finished a sweep of the searchlight filled the room with radiance for an instant, and then it was gone.

"Curse that eye of Sheitan!" growled one of the two, a sturdy Afridi. "Were it not for that, thou Kafir dog, we would have thy camp in tumult before the dawn!"

"Like enough," taunted Maxwell. "Were thy sandals worn by Sikhs they would not be on the feet of cowards. *Tauba!*"

The word of absolute contempt stung the two men to fury and their hands flew to their knives, but the Afridi restrained his comrade.

"Let be, brother. This infidel shall have no such easy death as a knife in his heart, for all of Petrovski sahib's bold words. He has no weapon, so let be, and make haste to return with him."

"What does Mir Khan want with me at this time of night?" asked Maxwell angrily.

"His business, not thine!" came the rough answer.

Maxwell said no more, but followed them out to the stairs that led down beside the guard-house to the courtyard.

The men were lying about small fires, wrapped in their sheepskin coats, and from the guard-house itself came the sound of groans ; as they passed the window Maxwell glanced in, and turned away with a slight shudder.

The wounded were being treated in time-honoured Afghan fashion, which involves wrapping the wound in meat and skin of fresh-slain sheep or goats, and to European eyes the sight is not a pleasant one.

He was led through the sleeping groups of hill-men, one or two of whom rose to curse him bitterly and fluently, to the low building next that of Marjorie.

The room into which he was pushed was bare save for a pile of skins in one corner and a table, on which burned a small lamp.

At one side stood Mir Khan and the trouble-breeder, evidently awaiting his arrival. Petrovski wore his usual cool, inscrutable mask, and Maxwell could read nothing in his eyes.

" Good ! " said Mir Khan curtly. " Shut the door and wait my bidding outside."

The guards salaamed and disappeared, and the chieftain turned to his prisoner.

" Maxwell sahib, why has no gun been turned against our walls this day? Are your gunners blinded by Allah? "

" How should I know? " returned Maxwell coldly. " No doubt they fear to harm Miss Danton. As to being blinded by Allah, the un-

believing Sikhs appeared to have no such infliction when they swept the true believers from the sangars."

The face of the Afridi chief darkened, and Petrovski shot a glance of warning at Maxwell, but the latter was in no mood for conciliation.

"What means this summons long past midnight?" he went on angrily, for his watch had shown that it was three in the morning. "Did you waken me to ask me the questions of a child?"

With an effort the chief restrained himself, and the trouble-breeder made smooth reply.

"Major, it has just occurred to us that we have been surprisingly negligent in not asking you a very obvious question long before this. How did you get entrance to the Hilt?"

Maxwell started. He had been dreading this very question. Madho Rao might be able to lead a party of Ghurkas up the steep crag that flanked the road near the gates, for to ascend by the way he had come before would be wellnigh impossible. But to let Mir Khan know that his cliffs had been scaled was out of the question at present.

"I might have come in with some of your villagers," he smiled.

"Wah!" Mir Khan waved an impatient hand. "There are no villagers here. These men are my men only. Tell us this thing, and I swear by the Koran that you shall go free."

"What? You would dare swear to such a transparent lie on the holy book?" temporized Maxwell, not believing the oath for a moment.

"Fool, to think that you can deceive me! I was brought hither by Allah, so say no more!"

"Then Allah had best guard thee!" and the angry chief fell into Pushtu. "Now speak, or by the Prophet of God thou shalt feel hot iron, and Petrovski sahib shall not save thee this time!"

"Iron?" Maxwell lost his temper. "I have heard much talk from thy mouth of iron and crucifixion, Mir Khan, but I have seen little of it. Thou fool, to set thyself up against the sirkar to let me befuddle thee like a child! Thou fool, to give the Sikh's Blood to a woman and fondle a falsehood to thyself! Go and play with the children in thy villages; go to the Sikhs and learn wisdom before they break into thy fortress and drown thy mullahs in swine's blood!"

For an instant Mir Khan's knife flashed out and Maxwell's life hung by a thread. Then, quivering with rage, the burly chieftain strode to the door, and Petrovski gave a helpless shrug that was more eloquent than words.

"Go!" thundered Mir Khan to his two men. "Waken the Feringee woman and bid her dress. When she is ready bring her here—and without insult, or you die!"

The sandals shuffled away and Mir Khan returned, glaring at Maxwell. During that pause not a word was spoken.

Too late Maxwell realized that his temper had got the better of him once more, and he waited, white to the lips. He had sprung the mine, and with a groan he realized his foolishness as he met the anxious gaze of Petrovski.

Five minutes later the shuffle of sandals sounded

again, and Marjorie entered. She was pale, and evidently frightened at this sudden summons, while her captivity had plainly worn upon her.

Perhaps it was this very thing that made her seem strangely beautiful in the dim light, with the great ruby glimmering at her throat, and Mir Khan's eyes devoured her hungrily when the guards had again withdrawn and slammed the door.

"By Allah!" he exclaimed in Pushtu, "this Feringee maid is more beautiful than I thought! This night shall she enter my zenana, and the Sikh's Blood with her—I swear it by the Prophet!"

He made one fierce stride forward, seizing Marjorie by the arm. The startled girl broke away with a faint cry, but even as Maxwell strained madly at his bonds the trouble-breeder sent his fist crashing against the chieftain's mouth, and Mir Khan went reeling back against the mud wall.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE TOWER

“MATE with thine own breed—thou *dog!*”

The hatred that had smouldered in the breast of the trouble-breeder flung itself into the epithet with vicious intensity. At the blaze of savage passion which lit the faces of the two men Marjorie gave a little cry and turned, her face in her hands. Nor was it a nice sight to look upon.

Mir Khan, with his innate sense of dramatic values, disdained to shout for help. The insult was his own, and his own hand must wipe it out in blood, according to the creed of the hills. As his powerful figure straightened up against the wall one hand slowly drew out his kukri, and his lips parted in a cruel smile.

“Fool, for that word you die!”

In answer Petrovski whipped out his own heavy-bladed knife, and for a moment the two gazed at each other in the fascination of deadly enmity. Forgotten was everything outside those four walls, as the lithe, sinewy Russian and the burly hillsman looked their hate.

A slight movement of Mir Khan's hand, a flash in the lamplight, and Petrovski was pinned to the wall by a fold of his kummerbund. Tearing loose with a quick snarl, he was on the hillsman

before the latter could draw his tulwar, with one swift lunge that drew a gasp from Maxwell.

Mir Khan had been in such duels before, however. He caught the insweeping wrist, and the next instant the two men were locked in a tense grip, hand to hand, breast to breast.

It was a sheer test of strength. Contorted by passion, Mir Khan's face leaped into wild surprise as Petrovski grappled ; then it seemed that neither man moved—that they stood watching and waiting.

Too well Maxwell knew there was no waiting here. Only the quivering muscles, the slight trembling of neck and arms and legs, betrayed the terrific duel that was going on beneath the surface. As he gazed, Maxwell felt a sudden quick thrill of hope. Now was the time !

"Marjorie," he cried softly, his face almost against the ear of the girl, "loosen my hands—quick !"

Horror-struck by that terrible, deadly, silent struggle a dozen feet away, the girl looked at him with startled eyes. Then, with a flash of comprehension, she choked back the sob on her lips and began to fumble desperately at the cloth about his wrists.

"Keep cool," murmured Maxwell, though his pulses were leaping in mad excitement. "For God's sake keep cool, Marjorie !"

Neither of them, perhaps, noticed the fact, but it was the first time he had called her by name. She smiled with trembling lips.

"I will. There—I found it !"

The bonds loosened and his hands fell free.

One went out to the girl, and she caught at it blindly; but Maxwell leaned forward, his eyes blazing.

For the knife had clattered down from Petrovski's hand. That clean, steel-like jaw was clenched firmly as ever, but on the man's brow and neck the knotted cords stood out as Mir Khan slowly bore him back.

The hillsman, still smiling cruelly, confidently, had flung his weight against the Russian, and the latter was giving beneath the strain.

The situation changed in a flash. With one terrible effort, his eyes starting from his head, Petrovski rallied and surged outward. Mir Khan, thrown back, loosened his grip, and the Russian's hand darted into his kummerbund for an instant. Then he lurched forward and flung both arms about the waist of the hillsman.

Maxwell gave a groan of dismay. Mir Khan's face was toward him, above the head of the Russian, and as his great arms closed about Petrovski's back the grey eyes gleamed with assurance. Suddenly, unexpectedly, they widened as in terror; a single gasp broke from his mouth, and his hands flew out, clutching the air.

Utterly astounded, Maxwell saw Petrovski's arms and shoulders quiver; Mir Khan's head went back—and as the hillsman went down in a crumpled heap the trouble-breeder reeled back and leaned on the table, panting, gasping for breath.

In the palm of his open and nerveless hand Maxwell saw a curved claw of steel fastened to a ring about his finger.

Then he understood that mad hug, that wild

horror in Mir Khan's eyes as the steel claw ripped into his back. Suddenly Petrovski looked up and saw the crouching girl, and his eyes met the intent gaze of Maxwell. A mirthless smile touched his pale lips.

"You win, Major!" came the slow, hoarse words. "Come—to the—door!"

A sweep of the man's hand, a little cry from Marjorie, and the lamp was out. Inwardly, Maxwell blessed the other for that merciful action. Had Marjorie seen that limp heap on the floor she must have fainted.

The door opened, and against the torch-lit courtyard appeared the black figure of the trouble-breeder, waiting.

"Come, Marjorie," gently commanded Maxwell, tenderly drawing her forward. "It's all over, and—your father is waiting. Be brave, little girl!"

She did not reply, but the pressure of her hands was answer enough. As he came to Petrovski's side the Russian shoved an automatic into his hand, with a word in English.

"Make for your tower, Maxwell. I'll take care of these fellows. Make a rope—and be quick! It's nearly dawn. Hide that revolver now!"

Maxwell pressed the still trembling hand of his enemy, and Petrovski, still standing in the dark doorway, sent a shout across the courtyard.

"Take the Kafir and the woman back to the tower, guards!"

Two or three men surrounded them instantly and led them to the steps. As they mounted toward the rampart Maxwell looked back. Petrovski had

slammed the door to and was striding after them, revolver in hand. Suddenly Mir Zada, plainly suspicious, rushed up to the trouble-breeder, knife in hand.

"Where is our lord, that he comes not out? Why should the Feringee woman——"

A sharp crack, a spit of flame, and the man whirled and fell, clutching at his throat. Petrovski turned his hawk-face, blazing with fury, on the aroused hillsmen.

"Dogs! You dare to beard me? Mir Khan is at his prayers—go seek him if you dare!"

As the guards paused at the shot Maxwell thrust Marjorie forward, and a moment later they were inside the tower room, where the little lamp still burned.

Taking her to the couch, he whipped out his revolver and sprang back to the doorway. Now was no time for making ropes.

Petrovski stood at the foot of the stone stairway, slowly moving backward. The wakened hillsmen, half hostile but paralysed by the fate of Mir Zada, stood in hesitation and did not offer violence.

As the trouble-breeder slowly began to back up the stairs, passing the men who had come with Maxwell and Marjorie, a shrill yell burst out across the courtyard.

"*Ma'uzbillah!* Our lord is murdered!"

With the word the Russian's weapon spat fire, and Maxwell joined in without hesitation, sending his full magazine into the crowded mass below. The effect was terrible. With a single yell of startled horror, the hillsmen broke and scattered before that sweeping hail of lead.

A moment later Petrovski was beside Maxwell, and thrust out a hand as the latter was shutting the door.

"Leave it open, Major," he said calmly. "I'll have to keep them off these stairs, and their bullets can't reach into the room. Here—tie them together."

As he spoke he had rapidly stripped himself of puggaree and kummerbund. Understanding his quick glance at the window, Maxwell took off the two long shawls he himself wore and was about to obey, when a hand fell on his arm, and he looked up to the face of Marjorie.

"Let me do that," she said quietly. "See—there is another on the couch."

Maxwell quickly pressed her away from the open door and left her with the long shawls. Reaching the side of the trouble-breeder, the latter chuckled and pointed.

"Look at the torches! Hear the dogs howling! If that fool Mir Khan had obeyed me he might have realized his ambition. As it is——"

His cool, imperturbable voice ceased as a rifle cracked and the bullet thudded into the door. Other rifles spoke, and a storm of wild, fierce yells shrilled up, though the hillsmen kept well under cover. Maxwell drew the other away from the open door.

"They won't rush until the mullahs get them worked up to it, Petrovski. Now, do you think those lungis will reach to the ground?"

"They'll have to," came the calm response. "I'll let you down first and Miss Danton after, if the rope reaches."

"And you?" retorted Maxwell anxiously. Petrovski's dark eyes rested on his face ironically for an instant, then softened oddly.

"I? My dear fellow, this place has been my life-work, and that fool has destroyed it all. With this night's work my influence has gone for ever. The Tulwar's Hilt was my dream, and when the dream is dissipated I go with it; but first I'll undo what evil I have helped to bring about. Once *she* has gone, and you with her—my work is done."

Unable to speak, Maxwell put out a hand silently, and Petrovski's gripped it for a long instant. The excited, furious harangue of the mullahs drifted up to them, punctuated by shrill yells and occasional shots, and the Russian produced fresh ammunition for the automatics.

"It's about time, I think," he remarked coolly. The firing had awakened the camp outside, and the searchlight hung over the walls for a moment, seeking the cause of the uproar in vain. Then it was switched off again, and, for fear of a ricochetting bullet striking Marjorie, Maxwell partially closed the door.

"*Allahu akbar!*"

The blood-mad yell quavered up as the bullets thudded against door and walls, and by tacit consent the two men waited until the rush got part way up the stairs, when the riflemen opposite would perforce cease shooting. The torches had been extinguished in the courtyard by this time, and when Maxwell flung open the door there was only a crowd of dark figures on the stairs, with a black mass behind, in sight.

A few hillsmen fired upward at the two, and a bullet went through Maxwell's hair as he raised his arm, a fresh clip in his left hand.

"All right, Major. By turns!"

Petrovski fired, and a man rolled from the stairs with a yell. Another plunged backward at Maxwell's shot, and before the clips were emptied the crowd had broken and fled.

A sharp cry from the Russian drew Maxwell's attention to the ramparts, where other hillsmen were rushing forward, and these also were scattered without trouble.

As the tower cut the rampart squarely in two and rose well above it, those within could command the walls, and Maxwell drew the other inside and bolted the door.

"Well, how is the rope?" he asked, smiling. Marjorie looked up, a gleam of joy in her eyes as she saw he was unhurt.

"Almost done! Do you think it will be long enough?"

"It ought to be, certainly." Maxwell went to the window and peered out toward the camp. The searchlight was sweeping gates and walls again, but he could see that the dawn was nearly at hand. A glance through the loopholes showed him that, save for a few sentries, the ramparts were deserted.

"The men are holding a *jirgah*," announced the trouble-breeder, turning from the door as rifles began to speak out again. "They're probably electing some leader in Mir Khan's place. Time you were getting off, Major."

He felt in his breast and tenderly extracted a tiny case, which he held out. In astonishment,

Maxwell took one of the slender, tubed Russian cigarettes, and, noting that it bore a crest of gold, turned it over quickly. Petrovski smiled, with the semblance of a bow to Marjorie, as he lit his own at the lamp and extended the light to the other man.

"With your permission. Thank you! These are a few I have cherished for weeks, Maxwell. Excellent, are they not?"

"Quite," returned Maxwell gravely, emitting a thin cloud of smoke from his lips. He turned to Marjorie, and found the words awkward on his lips, for Petrovski's touch of formality was grotesque enough.

"Is it ready—Miss Danton?"

She rose, holding out the trailing lengths of knotted shawls, and there was the shadow of a smile on her pale face as she met his eyes.

"Quite ready—Major Maxwell."

That piteous little smile told him all he needed to know, and as he caught the shawls he caught her hand with them, pressing it to his lips for an instant. No further word passed between them, nor was any word needed.

As the folds of the shawl rope slipped out across the stone window-sill, the trouble-breeder flipped the glowing end of his cigarette far out into the darkness and shrugged his shoulders as it fell from sight.

"So is life—a brief glow of vitality, and the Creator snaps the soul off into eternity. The scent of roses abides in the heart of the perfume-seller, as our friends the Shiahs say. Well, good-bye and good luck!"

"Thanks, Petrovski. May I wish you the same?"

The other smiled and waved him to be gone. Maxwell crawled out, saw the Russian wind the end of the rope about the leg of a charpoy and grip it fast, and with a last look at Marjorie he dropped over the edge of the parapet.

As he did so he uttered a groan and a savage curse, for he found himself in a blinding glare of light—the searchlight from the camp was sweeping the walls again! One quick yell from the sentries told him he was seen, and the bullets began to snap around him.

As he went down, hand over hand, he felt the knotted shawls suddenly sag, and his heart leaped. But they held, and a moment later the searchlight was gone.

Now the rifles were sending bullets all about him; a splinter of stone tore into his cheek, something burned across his arm, and for a second he hung, swinging and twisting about; but with an effort he began the descent once more.

A torch was flung over the walls and a fresh burst of firing began, the quick flare betraying him. Still he continued his slow progress, while the bullets thudded and sang about him, whining viciously as they struck the walls below and shot down to spatter on the rocks beneath.

A groan broke from his lips, and he quivered under the shock as something struck his side, sluing him about. It was only a scratch, as he realized instantly, and again he collected himself and went on.

Another torch—and as it died out in a shower

of sparks underneath, he felt the shawls give a sickening lurch, and he knew that again a bullet had gone through.

"Good Lord!" he thought. "Petrovski can never send her down here—and I've left her there—alone!"

With a single wild sob in his throat, he began to claw madly at the rope, thinking to ascend once more. Even as he did so there came a hesitating sag of the knotted shawls, and he realized his twofold danger.

Giving up the effort, he slid downward desperately. Two or three torches were flung out, and the sudden burst of light showed him the face of Petrovski above, and the shawls, all but torn apart and ripping farther as he gazed. Then came darkness, more rifles spat lead at him—and the rope gave way.

Maxwell shot down for a dozen feet, the long shawls winding about him as he fell to land in a huddled heap. One exultant yell quavered up from the walls; then came the sharp, quick reports of Petrovski's automatic, wild curses from the hillsmen, and silence.

Struggling to his feet, Maxwell gazed upward despairingly. Plainly the attack was repulsed again, but Marjorie was there, unable to escape! The thought was maddening to him, and he flung the shawls from him with a groan. The short fall had taken his breath, but aside from his slight wounds he was uninjured.

"The Sikhs—there might yet be time!" he muttered hoarsely. "If we could only blow in the gates we could save her yet!"

He stumbled away in desperate haste, dry sobs catching at his throat, with a frenzied hope that if he could reach the camp below he might yet rescue the girl he loved.

The trouble-breeder could not hold out for long ; his cartridges would soon give out, and then—Maxwell cursed at the thought of it.

As he drew away from the walls, stumbling across the bodies of hillsmen slain in that first encounter, he knew that the dawn was almost at hand. Suddenly through the gloom he perceived half a dozen dark figures rushing at him, and knew that he was lost.

“Curse you !” he cried hoarsely, jerking out his revolver and backing up against a deserted sangar. “I’ll send some of you back to Hades first, you fiends !”

CHAPTER XX

PETROVSKI PAYS

"GOOD Lord! Hold up, there. That you, Maxwell?"

At the words Maxwell dropped his revolver, a wordless cry breaking from his lips. Then a hand reached out and caught his, and the dark figures were around him.

"Quiet, old man!" came the low, tense voice of Bobby Manners. He felt his hand pressed to a dark forehead, and Madho Rao whispered his relief and joy.

"Heavenborn, you are safe! We had given you up——"

"Silence!" commanded Manners curtly. "Maxwell, are you hurt?"

"A few scratches—nothing more." Maxwell gazed around, feeling as if he were in a dream. Another torch flickered over from the top of the ramparts, but it did not reveal the little group behind the sangar, and only a disappointed yell arose as the hillsmen saw that Maxwell had vanished.

"Come along with us!" replied Manners excitedly. "We've been all night getting up that rock wall. Here's some dynamite—volunteer party, you know. The Sikhs are waiting to rush the

gates ; we didn't dare bombard the place yesterday."

Maxwell recovered himself quickly. He could not repress a slight laugh as he saw the glimmer of Manners's gold-rimmed monocle in the gloom, and the fantasy of it struck him.

"Mir Khan's dead," he whispered. A few words, and the situation was explained to Manners and the five Ghurkas. "What about the search-light?"

"It's off now, Major. They've been playing it on the place to keep any sortie in check. We'll have to act quickly, though ; the stars are going out !"

Maxwell pressed the hand of the debonair little hero who had volunteered for this desperate job and turned.

From somewhere down the slope came a low murmur, and he knew that the Sikhs must be drawing nearer in their impatience. Overhead the stars were beginning to pale, and the work must be done swiftly.

As he and Manners led the way forward, Maxwell felt a surge of joy in his heart. Not for a moment did he doubt their success ; at the very instant when things seemed darkest hope had sprung to him out of the night, and unless Petrovski's cartridges gave out—

"Here we are !"

At the whisper Maxwell found the walls looming black above, with the small, ironbound gate a dozen feet away. He heard Manners's slight mutter to Madho Rao.

"Give me the fuses and detonators."

The Ghurka turned to his comrades. For a moment there came an uneasy whisper; then blank consternation settled over Maxwell as Madho Rao made reply—

“Sahib—they were not brought! We have the dynamite, but——”

“My God!” The strangled words broke from Manners as he realized their position. Before Maxwell could interpose, he made a fierce gesture to the men. “Set the stuff against the gate—quickly!”

That brief colloquy had attracted attention, however. As the little Ghurkas went crowding about the gate there came a loud yell from above, and a torch was flung down.

“*Allahu!* The enemy!”

“Back, all of you!” shouted Manners, as the shouts sounded above, mingled with the tramp of feet, and one or two rifles flashed out. Maxwell seized him, comprehending his mad purpose.

“Farther back, Manners!” he exclaimed quietly, calming the excitement of the other.

The Ghurkas had deposited their loads and were waiting irresolutely. Now the ramparts above were lined with yelling men, and a hail of lead was pouring down. Two of the Ghurkas dropped, and, without further hesitation, Manners whipped out his revolver, Maxwell following suit in desperate haste. Two shots rang out as one.

With a blinding flash and a roar, Maxwell felt himself flung back against Manners, and both went to the ground together, the breath driven from them by that terrific shock.

In the terrible silence that followed the explosion

there came a crash of stones and masonry, a single quavering yell of dismay from the hillsmen, and Maxwell found himself engulfed in a dark mass of men from whom thundered one deep roar, thrilling hate, into the dawn.

"Wah! Guru! Guru!"

The Sikhs, with the Ghurkas behind them, streamed into the narrow gate before the bewildered hillsmen awoke to the situation. Maxwell found himself pulled up, and gazed into the anxious eyes of Madho Rao; but he was still weak and giddy from that terrific shock, and was forced to pause. Then from the figure of Manners, stretched at his feet, came a groan.

"Confound it! Smashed up—just my bally luck!"

Maxwell was on his knees instantly, trying to lift the gallant subaltern.

"Hurt badly, old fellow? What's smashed?"

"My monocle—gone all to Hades! Here, leave me alone—my leg's broken, I think! Lay you odds it doesn't come off, old chap! Are you on?"

Maxwell gained his feet with a hysterical laugh, and turned to Madho Rao.

"Take care of Manners sahib; I must get inside there at once."

For the moment all thought of Marjorie had left him, and he plunged into the crowd that was jammed about the gate, with a fierce yell that gained him room as he was recognized.

The gates had been blown to pieces, and in their place was a heap of rubble and stones, over which the Sikhs were pouring with exultant yells.

As he stumbled up across the pile of shattered masonry, the searchlight broke clear on the fortress again ; but already the swift Eastern dawn had broken, and when he gained sight of the courtyard Maxwell paused aghast.

The place was an inferno. In that mad charge the British officers had been swept headlong by their men, and only two or three were in sight, trying vainly to restrain the blood-crazed Sikhs.

The whole courtyard was seething with men and steel in the grey dawn, while the stones under Maxwell's feet were slippery and sticky.

Not a hillsman had asked for quarter, but every man was fighting desperately to the last, striving only to cut down an infidel before he met death. It was a silent, grim, terrible fight to the death, for the Sikhs were using the bayonet only.

Maxwell saw a tall mullah, clad in chain armour won from some Rajput in olden days, sweep full into the midst of the Sikhs, cut down two with his tulwar, and go to the stones with his fingers about the throat of another as the bayonets stabbed.

A rush swept the space bare in front, and Maxwell dashed for the stairway. He had dropped his revolver, and before he gained the end of the long guard-house under the wall three hillsmen came at him with a yell of recognition.

Before they could reach him, however, a dozen Sikhs were upon them, and the three went down in a swirl of steel and blood.

Reaching the stairs, Maxwell's heart leaped at sight of two dark figures bounding up ahead of him. He guessed their object instantly, but as he

reeled and staggered after them with a hoarse shout there came two spits of flame from above, and the two hillsmen toppled over into the courtyard with a last shriek of baffled hate.

Then came another sharp crack and something sang past his ear. Remembering that he still wore his Pathan dress, Maxwell shouted hoarsely—

“Petrovski! Don't fire—it's Maxwell!”

With wildly anxious heart he stumbled up the stairs, to come upon the figure of the trouble-breeder. Petrovski was seated against the half-closed door, and greeted him with a cool wave of his revolver.

“Spoke just in time, Maxwell! I——”

“Where is Marjorie?” burst from him. “Is she safe?”

“Inside—all safe.” Petrovski's face looked strangely white and drawn in the still faint light, but at his laugh Maxwell pushed open the door and stepped past. The lamp was burning very dimly, and a moment later Maxwell caught Marjorie Danton in his arms.

“Thank God, Raymond! I thought—the rope——”

“I know, dear!” He soothed her with the first word of love that had passed between them, and for a single instant their lips met. “It's all right now—the place is as good as taken, and——”

“Oh,” she cried suddenly, pushing him away, “look after him—he's hurt!”

“Don't bother—thanks!” drawled the voice of the trouble-breeder from outside.

Marjorie, however, had broken from Maxwell, and he followed her to the door. Petrovski made

no move to get up, and Maxwell took him by the shoulder to help him to his feet.

"Hold on, Major!" he said with a faint smile on his ghastly face. "That one's broken!"

"Broken!" Maxwell straightened up in surprise. "All right, old man. Here, I'll have a surgeon up——"

"Don't be a fool!" returned the other curtly. "The game's over for me, Maxwell. You'd better take Marjorie down; they've cleaned my late allies pretty well out of the courtyard by this time."

Maxwell stared down at the man, and realized that Marjorie was crying softly beside him. The hillsmen had been swept out of the courtyard, but a desperate resistance was still being made among the buildings beyond and on the ramparts.

Two or three reached a Maxim and turned it with a ripping crash full on to the crowd below, until a volley quieted them. Slowly Maxwell realized that Petrovski had spoken truly, and he leaned over with a sob.

"I suppose you'll blow up the place?" asked Petrovski, his voice suddenly faint. Maxwell, unable to speak, nodded. "Then I wish you'd leave me here and let me go with it, Maxwell. You see, it's been my life-work, and——"

"I understand," replied Maxwell. "But come! There may be a chance for you yet. Let me get some of the men up here and we'll have a look at you."

"No use," and the Russian shook his head. "One through the shoulder, another in the knee, two more in the abdomen. Marjorie, I'd like to speak to you for a moment!"

The girl came to his side, unheeding her tears, and for a little Petrovski gazed at her with eyes that had lost their fierce brilliancy. Then he spoke with a smile—

“You didn’t know, of course, but I loved you, Marjorie Danton. If I hadn’t been a reckless fool in letting—Mir Khan do what—he wanted to—well, no matter. Time’s short. I’ve paid the debt—good-bye, Maxwell !”

His features pale, and working in self-restraint beneath their dark colouring, Maxwell took the limp hand. Marjorie leaned forward, and her lips touched the pallid brow of the Russian ; a second later Maxwell felt the hand relax in his and drop.

He caught Marjorie’s arm and raised her to her feet. They stood there for a long moment, looking into each other’s eyes, while the courtyard below filled and emptied and filled again as the troops surged through the places.

“Raymond—he gave his life for me !”

Marjorie dropped her head on his shoulder, weeping unrestrainedly, and Maxwell put an arm about her in support.

“He paid his debt, Marjorie,” was his grave answer. “He lived badly but he died a hero, and we’ll leave him in the Tulwar’s Hilt with his broken dreams.”

A shout from below aroused him, and he looked down to see men running toward the stairway, while a group of officers were entering the breach. Drawing Marjorie’s head up until her eyes met his, he smiled down softly—

“Come, dear ! I think your father would like to see you—don’t you ?”

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